

BIG IDEA DEVOTIONS FOR PREACHERS

A THESIS-PROJECT

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BY

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To Norma Jean

Beloved and Friend

Thank you for always reminding me to keep it simple and clear

“I am the vine; you are the branches.
If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit;
apart from me you can do nothing.”

—John 15:5

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Soli Deo Gloria

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis-project was to test a method of personal devotions developed by the researcher, called “Big Idea Devotions.” Based on the same principles as Big Idea Preaching, this method gives practitioners a simple, Scripture-formed prayer to carry through the day, thereby deepening spiritual intimacy. A group of 24 pastors and ministry workers were trained in the Big Idea Devotions method and given three weeks to put it into practice. Using questionnaires and a focus group, the method was shown to produce significant improvement in key areas, most notably retention of biblical truth and satisfaction with devotional life.

CHAPTER 1:

THE PROBLEM IN ITS SETTING

Introduction

Pastors have a high calling. As shepherds of their flocks, they are charged with leading, feeding, and setting an example for the precious people that God has placed under their charge (1 Peter 5:2). To raise the stakes even higher, the calling of pastors is not limited to the hours they are officially “on the clock,” like most other professions. Generally speaking, practitioners of other vocations can “take off their badge” when they’re not working, because the way they conduct their personal lives has little or no bearing on their job effectiveness. Not so with pastors: they are called to live out in their everyday lives the message they proclaim on Sundays (1 Corinthians 11:1, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 5:3).

Because of the all-encompassing nature of their calling, it is critically important that pastors maintain a close, personal walk with God. In the words of Mike Gilbert-Smith, “Our churches’ great need is for pastors who know Jesus, pastors who are devoted to pursuing Christ even before they pursue ministry. So long as the pursuit of Christ is merely a means to some other end (including ministry), then we have idolaters for pastors.”¹

1. Gilbert-Smith, “The Pursuit of Christ in the Devotions of a Pastor” 9Marks (Feb. 26, 2021): <https://www.9marks.org/article/pursuit-christ-devotions-pastor/>.

To borrow categories from the study of ancient Greek rhetoric, pastors need to have a high level of *ethos*. Stated simply, the *ethos* of a pastor's ministry is who he/she is as a person, beyond any ministry position or title he/she may hold. When people interact with that pastor, what do they sense about his or her integrity, humility, and love for God? The answer to that question is tremendously important, because it is possible to conduct public ministry in a way that powerfully uses the truth of Scripture (*logos*) and with great passion (*pathos*), but that ministry will ultimately fall flat if the listeners are not convinced that the pastor is living the message he or she claims to believe (*ethos*).

While Jesus occasionally faulted the Pharisees for the *logos* (objective content) of their teaching, he was more concerned with their lack of *ethos*. He frequently labeled them "hypocrites," which was the Greek word for "actor" (ὑποκριτής). In other words, they conducted their public ministry wearing a mask—pretending to be someone they were not. These elite religious leaders presented a pious exterior, but Jesus recognized that their hearts were far from God. This indictment reaches a crescendo in Mathew 23, where Jesus pronounced seven "woes" on the Pharisees: specific examples of their hypocrisy. Jesus was making the same charge against them that Paul later made about false teachers in Titus 1:16—"They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good."²

Lee Eclov offers this timely warning: "Finally, beware of the preacher's shellac, that hard, shiny coating we swab over sermons sometimes. We put on our preacher voice with its

2. All Scripture citations in this thesis-project are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011*.

practiced earnestness and authority. But we've become actors rather than preachers. In time, though your people might not quite know why, you will no longer be credible."³

These biblical warnings are intended as a warning for spiritual leaders of all ages. The danger of drifting into hypocrisy is very real, and pastors would be wise to take this warning to heart. As Eugene Peterson writes in *Working the Angles*, "I don't know of any other profession in which it is quite as easy to fake it as in ours."⁴ And John Ortberg writes, "The main thing you will give your congregation — just like the main thing you will give to God — is the person you become. If your soul is unhealthy, you can't help anybody."⁵ Hypocrisy not only incurs the displeasure of God; it renders a pastor's ministry unfruitful and will eventually produce such cognitive dissonance that personal burnout will be the likely outcome.

Enough of this depressing talk! Happily, on the positive side, when there is alignment between a pastor's outward ministry and inner life, God is pleased. Pastors who live with integrity have more peace in their inner lives and more credibility in their ministries. Their public ministry becomes a natural overflow of what is happening in their everyday walk with the Lord, and their congregation will see and be encouraged by that congruence. While no human can attain spiritual perfection in this life, it is possible for a pastor to walk in daily intimacy with God: worshiping, praying, repenting of sin, obeying, and loving God and neighbor.

3. Eclov, "Persuasion in Preaching," Preaching Today (June 2016): <https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2016/june/persuasion-in-preaching.html>.

4. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987), location 59, Kindle.

5. John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 85.

In other words, it is not unrealistic to say that pastors can and should practice what they preach!

The Problem

And this leads to the problem: many pastors struggle to walk in daily intimacy with God. There are certainly many causes for this: the pressures of ministry, the demands of life, poor time management, etc. But I believe a significant cause for the disconnect is that many pastors are not enjoying regular intimacy with God through Scripture reading and prayer. According to a recent survey, only 16% of American pastors reported being “very satisfied” with their personal prayer lives.⁶

While they may spend hours in the Word each week as they prepare sermons, many pastors don’t devote consistent time to listening for God’s Word to *them*, personally. And while they likely start their day with a prayer, they don’t enjoy a rich, conversational prayer life that nurtures their souls and deepens their love relationship with God. As a ministry colleague recently confided in me, his devotional times have been generally unfulfilling and disappointing because, in his words, “I just read a few chapters of the Bible and go about my day, and I quickly forget what I’ve read.” He is not alone. So, because of the challenges of maintaining daily intimacy with God, many pastors are in danger of the very hypocrisy of which Jesus warns.

6. “Most Pastors Unsatisfied with Their Personal Prayer Lives,” Baptist Press (June 6, 2005): (<https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/most-pastors-unsatisfied-with-their-personal-prayer-lives/>).

Hypothesis

How can pastors nurture a spiritual intimacy that will bring greater alignment between their public ministries and their personal lives? I would like to propose one answer to this question: pastors can nurture this kind of spiritual intimacy by applying the methods of Big Idea Preaching to their personal devotional lives. This possibility is especially tantalizing for pastors who already use a Big Idea approach in their preaching ministry: could the path to deeper spiritual intimacy be as simple as taking the same set of skills they use in weekly preaching and applying them to their daily meetings with God? From my experience, I believe it could, indeed, be that simple.

Of course, “simple” does not imply “easy.” Just as effective Big Idea preaching requires discipline and practice, the same must be said for Big Idea devotions: mastery of this devotional method will require learning some new habits through repetition, trial-and-error, and experiencing some frustration in the process. But, as with Big Idea Preaching, the payoff is well worth the effort.

Big Idea Preaching: What is it?

At this point, it will be helpful to briefly define Big Idea Preaching. Big Idea Preaching is a homiletical approach in which the main idea of the biblical text becomes the main idea of the sermon, and the sermon communicates that main idea in a simple, clear, memorable way. As a result, the listeners walk away from the sermon with a clear word from God: a single, compelling thought ringing in their ears (and in their hearts). This approach to preaching is, in

my view, the most effective way to (1) be true to Scripture and (2) to affect change in the lives of the listeners. Let's talk briefly about both of those assertions.

First, why is Big Idea preaching the most effective way to be true to Scripture? In his classic book *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson explains: "First, and above all, the thought of the biblical writer determines the substance of an expository sermon."⁷ So in the exegetical stage, the Big Idea preacher diligently cuts through subordinate thoughts and peripheral detail in the text in order to grasp the central idea that the Holy Spirit-inspired author is communicating. The preacher then takes that central idea and makes it the central idea of the sermon. In this way, skillful Big Idea messages are truly faithful to Paul's admonition: "Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2). As Gibson and Willhite state, "...the only way to say 'thus saith the Lord' is to say what the Bible says. No other preaching is genuinely biblical."⁸

And why is Big Idea Preaching the most effective way to effect change in the lives of the listeners? Because the human mind grasps and retains a clear, unified message much better than an unclear, scattered message. Gibson and Willhite explain,

There exists a remarkable consensus among those who have studied and practiced public speaking over the last twenty-five hundred years that the most effective way to structure a speech is to build it around a single significant thought. From the ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians to the latest communication theorists, from the preaching in the Bible to the sermons heard in pulpits today, from the political oratory of democracies long past to the persuasive message of our own times, the history of public speaking and the lessons we have learned from that history unite to argue forcefully that a speech, to be maximally effective,

7. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), location 181, Kindle.

8. Scott M. Gibson and Keith Willhite, *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 16.

ought to attempt to develop more or less fully only one major proposition.⁹

Robinson applies this wisdom to preaching: “Sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas.”¹⁰ And therefore, he says, “A sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot. Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture.”¹¹

To bolster this argument, Sunujkian points out that every one of Paul’s sermons in the book of Acts is structured around one central idea: “Each sermon—whether given to Jews (Acts 13), Gentiles (Acts 17), or Christians (Acts 20)—crystallizes into a single sentence that states the sum and substance of the whole message. Everything in the sermon either leads up to, develops, or follows from this single unifying theme.”¹²

In summary, Big Idea preaching honors the biblical text by faithfully communicating its central message, and it penetrates the hearts of the listeners by being clear, singular, and memorable.

Now let’s get a bit more detailed. How does the preacher go about discerning the Big Idea for a particular text of Scripture? Sunujkian suggests that we follow our basic exegesis on the text with this question: “What is the largest question the biblical author is addressing with

9. Gibson and Willhite, *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, p. 20.

10. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, loc. 393.

11. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, loc. 402.

12. Donald Sunujkian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007), 67.

this flow of thought, and what answer is he giving to that question?”¹³ Note the emphasis on “the largest question,” as opposed to “every question.” The interpreter needs to rise above the “trees” and see the “forest”—the main, overarching idea—of the passage.

In order to do this effectively, the Big Idea method involves determining the “subject” and the “complement” of the text.¹⁴ When we say “subject,” we don’t mean it in the normal grammatical sense. Instead, the subject answers the question: “What is the text talking about?” This is expressed in the form of a question. For example, the subject of John 3:16 might be phrased as: “How did God show his love for the world?” And the complement essentially completes the subject by answering the question: “What is the text saying about what it’s talking about?” In the case of John 3:16, the complement can be stated: “By giving his only Son, so that all who believe will avoid perishing and live eternally.” Putting the subject and complement together, the Big Idea becomes: “The way God showed his love for the world was by sending his only son, so that all who believe will avoid perishing and live eternally.”

It should be noted that there is a distinction between the *exegetical* Big Idea and the *homiletical* Big Idea. The exegetical Big Idea arises from asking hermeneutical questions: what the biblical text is talking about, and what it’s saying about what it’s talking about. The *homiletical* Big Idea arises from asking homiletical questions: in light of my culture and listeners, what am I, as a preacher, talking about, and what I am saying about what I’m talking about.

13. Sunujkian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 73.

14. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, loc 489-495.

Obviously, the homiletical Big Idea needs to faithfully and transparently reflect the exegetical Big Idea, skillfully contextualizing it for the benefit of the modern-day listeners.¹⁵

For example, again using the example of John 3:16, the homiletical subject might be: “How can we avoid perishing and have eternal life?” And the complement: “By believing in God’s loving gift of his only Son.” Putting the subject and complement together, the homiletical Big Idea becomes: “The way we can avoid perishing and have eternal life is to believe in God’s loving gift of his only Son.”

Finally, in order to make the Big Idea maximally “preachable,” the homiletical idea is turned into a pithy, memorable statement which is repeated frequently throughout the sermon. For example, the preachable Big Idea for John 3:16 might be: “Our response to Christ leads to death or life.” When a preacher reinforces the Big Idea at key points in the sermon, the listeners will likely remember it and benefit from its truth long after the sermon ends.¹⁶ One could picture a scenario in which someone hears a skillful sermon on John 3:16, and three days later he thinks, “I can’t remember the name of that guy Jesus was talking to, or whether he was a Pharisee or a Sadducee, or why he approached Jesus in the first place, but I remember this: ‘Our response to Christ leads to death or life.’” This is the benefit of Big Idea preaching.

So what happens if there is no central idea communicated in the sermon? The listeners will likely walk away unaffected. Says Sunujkian, “Without a central take-home truth, the listener will either focus on one of the small points or leave in despair at the bewildering array

15. Gibson and Willhite, *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, 17.

16. Sunujkian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 66.

of apparently unrelated ideas.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, many of us can attest to this disappointing experience in the preaching we’ve heard over the years. For the glory of God and the good of our congregations, we need to do better...and I believe Big Idea preaching helps us do much better.

Taking the “Big Idea” Beyond Preaching

If this approach to communication is so well established, you would think that church leaders would have applied it beyond the world of preaching. And they have. In David Currie’s *The Big Idea of Biblical Worship*, he encourages church leaders to structure entire worship services around a single Big Idea. So instead of limiting the core teaching of that day’s text to the preached Word, that same core idea gives direction to the service’s musical worship, prayers (praise, gratitude, confession, intercession), artistic elements, and closing benediction.¹⁸

A similar approach is used by Dave Ferguson and his team at Community Christian Church, with particular emphasis on take-home application, incorporating not only the worship service but also that day’s children’s and youth ministries. Writes Ferguson, “Every week, we give all of our people of every age and at every location one Big Idea and ask them to put it into action.”¹⁹

17. Sunujkian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 70.

18. David A. Currie, *The Big Idea of Biblical Worship: The Development & Leadership of Expository Services* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017).

19. Dave Ferguson, Jon Ferguson, and Eric Bramlett. *The Big Idea: Focus the Message, Multiply the Impact*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), location 317, Kindle.

In my own church setting, we regularly employ this approach, with good results. The message gets repeated, rephrased, and reinforced in multiple ways, thus causing it to sink in more deeply and be retained far beyond one hour on Sunday morning. We can tell we've been adequately clear when that day's Big Idea is the subject of post-service lobby discussions and lunches! I hope and pray that more churches will adopt this approach.

How this Applies to Personal Devotions

However, to my knowledge, no one has intentionally applied the power of the Big Idea to personal devotions. Granted, for some, the question of how to structure personal devotions isn't something they have ever felt the need to do. For more liturgically-minded people, reading from the *Book of Common Prayer* and praying the daily office provides the structure they need for their daily times with God. And for people with less confidence in handling the biblical text, pre-packaged devotional guides serve them well.

But aside from these two categories, there are vast numbers of Christians who employ some form of the evangelical "quiet time": a focused period, usually at the start of the day, involving Bible reading and prayer. This is the tradition with which I'm most familiar, and I'm not aware of anyone from my tradition proposing a Big Idea approach for devotions. I believe it's time.

Part of my motivation stems from frustration—that of others and myself. In my experience, I've often seen the same sad effects of unfocused preaching occurring in people's personal devotional lives. Just as we often walk away from sermons scratching our heads at the disparate thoughts we just heard, we can walk away from a time of personal Bible reading with

similar fuzziness. Most of us can relate to the dissatisfaction of my colleague who said “I read a few verses and quickly forget everything I just read.”

How I Got Here

Personally, my devotional life has been a mixed bag throughout my ministry. I am by nature a disciplined person, so I’ve been fairly consistent in carving out daily time to spend with God. There have been seasons where those daily meetings have been very fulfilling and fruitful. But in full disclosure, there have also been many seasons of dryness. And although I established the habit of systematically reading through the Bible (much slower than most; it normally takes me about six years to read it through) many years ago, I had no method of pressing the truth of each day’s reading deep into my heart. There was certainly no clear connection between my reading and my prayer. And if you asked me in the evening, “What did God speak to you from the Word this morning?” I would likely respond with a blank look. In short, there was lots of room for improvement.

In 2019, I began my Doctor of Ministry studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. As part of the course requirements, I developed a “Personal Learning Covenant,” outlining how I would pursue growth in various areas of life during this season of doctoral studies. As part of that covenant, I committed to adding a new element to my daily devotions: a written journal. I had dabbled in journaling before, but it inevitably became a diary of activities (a worthwhile thing in itself, but not my goal). In those previous attempts I would sometimes record insights from that day’s Scripture, but it was unstructured and random, so the endeavor never lasted

long. But I decided to try it again, mostly to be more thorough in systematically praying for the important people in my life.

Each day I would start by reading and meditating on a short passage of Scripture. I wrote down a brief summary of the passage on the top of that day's page, recorded some thoughts and observations, and meditated on it a little more. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Reading Scripture is not the same as listening to God"²⁰ so I focused on listening to God through the words of Scripture. The simple act of writing down my insights was valuable: they became more memorable, and it was encouraging to look back over previous days and see a record of my interactions with the Word.

After my daily interaction with Scripture, I turned to prayer. Again, it was for the purpose of more intentional prayer that I decided to begin using a journal. So my approach was this: besides praying for my wife and children every day, in the back of the journal I made four lists of people: my staff, my elders, the men in my men's group, and the missionaries supported by our church. Each day I took one name from each list, wrote it at the bottom of each day's page, and prayed specifically for those people. That alone was a big improvement, as I prayed much more faithfully for the people God had put in my life.

But over time, as I followed each day's Scripture reading with a time of intercessory prayer, something unexpected began to happen: I found the concepts and language from that day's Scripture showing up in my prayers! In other words, rather than praying random blessings

20. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987), location 838, Kindle.

over people, and even more than praying for any specific personal concerns that person might have, I found myself specifically praying elements of that day's Scripture for the people on my list. Without my even intending it, the truth of God's Word was shaping my prayers, and that was exciting. It seemed right, and I sensed more power and "teeth" in my prayers.

I saw the same thing happening as I prayed for myself. Instead of simply praying what was "top of mind" for me at that moment, the content of the Scripture was clearly influencing what I was asking God to do in my own life. This also seemed right, as I realized how easy it is to be unimaginative in praying for ourselves, or to pray for the "specks in the eyes" of others while denying God access to our own souls.

I now realize that I was experiencing an important truth about our relationship with God. As Eugene Peterson wrote, "God has the first word. Prayer is answering speech; it is not primarily 'address' but 'response.'"²¹ And Tim Keller wrote, "...our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scripture. We should 'plunge ourselves into the sea' of God's language, the Bible. We should listen, study, think, reflect, and ponder the Scriptures until there is an answering response in our hearts and minds."²² By allowing God to speak first, my prayer life was transforming.

As the months went by and I continued enjoying the fruits of this devotional approach, my DMin program started its focus on homiletics. Through the reading assignments, I was reminded of the principles of Big Idea preaching. Although I had been grounded in this

21. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, loc. 450.

22. Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. (Westminster: Penguin, 2014), 55.

approach in my ThM studies in the 1990s, over the years I had cooled in my opinion of Big Idea preaching, migrating to more of a Christ-centered, redemptive-historical approach. But as I re-encountered Big Idea preaching after twenty-five years of ministry, I was impressed with how much sense it made and how powerful it could be. The more I pressed into it, the more I began adopting the Big Idea approach in my preaching ministry (although I still incorporate Christ-centeredness in almost every sermon as well!)

And this brings me to the “a-hah!” moment when it all came together. I had already seen how the truth of each day’s Scripture was influencing how I prayed for myself and others; now I realized there was a way to be much more intentional in that Scripture-prayer connection. At the risk of being too academic and “sitting over” the text, I began applying Big Idea principles as I handled the text for each day. After reading and meditating on the passage, I wrote out a subject and complement. I phrased them more homiletically than exegetically; i.e., lot of “we” and “I” statements. And then perhaps the most critical step: instead of taking the homiletical Big Idea and turning it into a pithy, memorable Big Idea statement that would appear throughout a sermon, I turned it into a *prayer*.

Here’s an example from a recent personal devotional time...

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-4

Subject: How should my spiritual identity affect my life focus?

Complement: My heavenly identity should give me a heavenly focus.

Prayer: “Father, help me to hold earthly things loosely, and joyfully set my heart and mind on higher things.”

This was the prayer that I first prayed thoughtfully over myself, verbalizing and repenting of

some of the earthly things that I'm tempted to be overly absorbed with, and asking for a renewed focus on eternal things. Then I took that same prayer and prayed it for the people on my prayer list for the day. Since I know each person personally, I was able to name some of the earthly things in their lives they may be tempted to cling to, and asked for God's grace in lifting their vision higher. As usual, these specific, biblically-grounded prayers elicited my passion and earnest desires for the growth of my friends.

But the benefit continued beyond the 45 minutes I spent in devotions that morning. As I headed into my day, I carried the Big Idea and the resulting prayer with me. Later that morning, I had a conversation with my teenaged son about an upgrade he was thinking about making on his car. As we discussed options, I was silently reminding myself to hold "car things" loosely. I certainly wanted to care about this issue, since it was important to him, but Colossians 3:1-4 reminded me to not take it too seriously. My son's car is temporary; his soul is eternal. In fact, later that same day, it was because of the day's Big Idea, ringing in my ear, that I asked my son—who is struggling with faith—if he would spend some time with me over the next few months talking about the teachings of Jesus. I was delighted that he agreed.

This is a simple example of how applying Big Idea principles to personal devotions can add significant depth and fruitfulness to our walk with God. As I've continued using this approach, my daily intimacy with God has improved dramatically. I look forward to my devotional times more than I ever have, and "skip" very rarely. I have more to share with others with whom I come in contact during the day.

Bringing the discussion full circle to how I began this chapter, this approach to devotions has brought greater alignment between the message I preach and the everyday life I live. I

experience a daily rhythm of hearing from God and speaking to God, leading to a freshness in my spiritual walk that spills over into every aspect of my ministry. I've experienced so many benefits personally, and I'm excited to see other pastors experience similar results.

In summary, it is my contention that by incorporating Big Idea principles into their daily meetings with God, the devotional life of preachers will improve substantially and their intimacy with God will grow as a result. Just as they want their congregation to walk away from a sermon with one clear idea—the main idea of that day's Scripture—ringing in their ears, preachers will walk away from their personal devotions with similar clarity. This is God's Word to them for that day, and they will find themselves meditating on it, basing their prayers on it, and sharing it with others. This has been my own experience over the past two years, and I believe the same benefits can be experienced by others.

Project Design

In order to test my hypothesis, I will gather a group of 10-20 pastors who are familiar with Big Idea Preaching to participate in three-week study. They will begin by completing an initial questionnaire, assessing the quality of their current devotional life. Next, I will conduct a Zoom training session with all the participants, presenting the concept of Big Idea Devotions. Coming out of this meeting, students will put this concept into practice in their own personal devotions for the next three weeks. At the end of three weeks, each participant will complete a final questionnaire, reporting on their experience in implementing Big Idea Devotions. They will also be invited to participate in an optional focus group to share insights on their experience implementing Big Idea Devotions. In the final chapter I will include an analysis of the Closing

Questionnaire and focus group, assessing the degree to which my hypothesis has or has not been confirmed. I will also suggest ways to apply Big Idea Devotions, areas for further research, and make some closing personal comments.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:7-8 NIV).

Introduction

My goal in this chapter is to establish a biblical and theological foundation for the essential role of Scripture in nurturing spiritual intimacy, and the results of this intimacy in the life of believers—especially pastors. I will accomplish this through an exegesis of John 15:1-17, Jesus’ teaching on remaining in the vine. This teaching provides an excellent paradigm for how believers can interact with the Word of God, both the Living Word and the written Word (which are closely linked), in a dynamic, reciprocal way, which leads to supernatural results in the life of the believer. Throughout the exegesis, I will reinforce my conclusions with other Scriptures to show how this concept, while presented most clearly in John 15, is taught throughout the Bible. And finally, I will set the stage for how Big Idea Devotions can be a valuable method for taking Jesus up on his invitation to remain in the Vine.

Background and Context

Jesus’ opening statement, “I am the true vine,” is the seventh and last of his “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμι) sayings recorded in John’s Gospel. It is preceded by “I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the gate, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, and I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This teaching is positioned near the center of the Farewell Discourse (John 13:31-16:33), in which Jesus gives his disciples detailed instructions to prepare

them for his impending departure. They have grown accustomed to personal fellowship with him, and he now prepares them to continue this fellowship after he is physically absent.

Interestingly, this is the only one of the “I am” sayings accompanied by an additional predicate, “and my Father is the gardener.”¹ This shows the unity and dynamic relationship between Father and Son in the believer’s pursuit of spiritual intimacy. This acknowledgement of Trinitarian relationships is furthered by the fact that the “vine” teaching is located right in the middle of Jesus’ most extended teaching on the coming Holy Spirit (John 14:15-27; John 15:26-16:15). Taken together, this emphasis on the Trinity is a reminder that although Jesus plays a primary role in this process, and although he is the spokesman, spiritual intimacy is only experienced through the believer’s receptivity to the collaborative work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have the privilege of communing with the triune God!

Why does Jesus choose the image of a vine? I believe it is likely that his thinking was influenced by his immediate surroundings. As Mounce explains, “It is possible that if the text of this discourse was spoken as they walked from the upper room in Jerusalem down into the Kidron Valley and across to the Mount of Olives, they could have seen the great golden vine, the national emblem of Israel, on the front of the temple.”² This symbol on the Jerusalem temple may very well have reminded Jesus of the original calling of the nation of Israel: to be a vine, planted by God to produce godly fruit. This reminder, in turn, became the metaphor that

1. George Beasley-Murray, *Olive Tree Word Biblical Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:1, e-book.

2. Robert Mounce, *Olive Tree Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:1-17 intro materials, e-book.

Jesus chose to describe the dynamics of believers nurturing spiritual intimacy through him—the true Israel—after he had left them.

But whether or not Jesus’ choice of metaphor was influenced by seeing the temple vine, we can be certain that he chose this imagery for a historical/theological reason: he saw himself as fulfilling the vine image from the Old Testament. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the image of a vineyard or a vine is used to represent God’s people, the nation of Israel. One prime example is Psalm 80:8-9:

“You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it,
and it took root and filled the land.”

Another good example is Isaiah 5:7a,

“The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.”

So, in the mind of God, his covenant people—Israel collectively and Israelites individually—were like a vine that he graciously planted in their land. And as with a literal vineyard, the vinedresser lovingly tended the vine, fully expecting it to produce a harvest of fruit. However, in the case of Israel, the owner of the vineyard was disappointed with the harvest. Isaiah 5:7 continues:

“And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.”

Or, as described in Jeremiah 2:21,

“I had planted you like a choice vine
of sound and reliable stock.

How then did you turn against me
into a corrupt, wild vine?"

This failure of Israel to produce fruit in keeping with God's expectations provides the backdrop for Jesus' statement, "I am the *true* vine" (John 15:1, emphasis added). The implication is that Israel was the unsuccessful, failed vine, but now Jesus has come as the better, true vine. In other words, Jesus is fulfilling the purpose to which God originally called Israel: to produce the fruit of justice and righteousness. In the words of Gary Burge:

...in this ancient imagery [Jesus] has taken the place of Israel as God's true planting. The new concept is that God's vineyard holds one vine and Israel must inquire if it is attached to him...God's people are defined not as people now planted in the vineyard of Israel, but as people attached to Jesus.³

This is great news for Gentiles like me, because it means we have access to an intimate relationship with the living God not by virtue of our ethnicity, but through a vital attachment to Jesus. As mentioned above, as redeemed believers our relationship is not merely with God the Son; we are united with the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But as the only incarnate member of the godhead, Jesus is inviting us to visualize our point of connection as being primarily and most tangibly with him. So, before we discuss any of the mechanics of interacting with the written Word of God, let's never lose sight of the fact that we are nurturing a relationship not with a set of facts, but with the risen, living Christ! This realization should never cease to amaze us, and should be the be in the forefront of our minds each time we start our day with personal devotions.

3. Gary Burge, *Olive Tree NIV Application Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:1, e-book.

The question is: how does this attachment to Jesus work, in practical terms? The balance of this section will answer that question. In the remainder of this exegesis of John 15:1-17, I will examine the teaching of Jesus under two headings: *The Invitation to Remain in Christ*, and *The Results of Remaining in Christ*.

The Invitation to Remain in Christ

After Jesus establishes his identity as the Vine and his collaborative work with the Father (vv. 1-3), he issues the main command/invitation, which is “remain in me” (v. 4). This continues to be the central command in this teaching, appearing in various forms a total of nine times. It is clearly the main action we are being invited to take. So the obvious question we need to answer is: *What does Jesus mean when he invites us to remain in him?* In the extended metaphor of the vine, he likens our remaining in him to a branch that remains vitally attached to a vine, receiving the life-giving sap and nutrients of the vine and consequently bearing fruit. So how do we actually do this? Is it purely a subjective and internal exercise—a state of mind? Or does it include any kind of action—an objective, even measurable component? It is critical that we understand the meaning of Jesus’ invitation, because it is clearly possible to *not* remain in him (verses 4, 5, 6), and the consequences of such detachment are tragic. Whatever it means to “remain in Christ,” our spiritual well-being depends on it!

The Subjective Sense of Remaining in Christ

The Greek word for “remain” is μένω, which Strong defines as: “to stay (in a given place, state, relation or expectancy): abide, continue, dwell, endure, be present, remain, stand, tarry.”⁴ Burge emphasizes the subjective nature of this invitation with these words:

It reminds us that remaining in Christ, having an interior experience of Jesus (as a branch is nourished and strengthened by a vine), is a nonnegotiable feature of following Jesus. Many words could be used to describe this: mysticism, interiority, spiritual encounter. But without some dimension of an interior experience of the reality of Jesus, without a transforming spirituality that creates a supernatural life, doctrine and ethics lose their value.⁵

Theologians have referred to this as the believer’s “mystical union” with Christ. In the words of Louis Berkhof: “This union may be defined as *that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation.*”⁶ As the word “mystical” suggests, it involves a spiritual reality which must be understood and experienced by faith.

So, in order to take Jesus up on his invitation to remain in him, believers must consciously remind themselves that Jesus is alive and present with them through the Holy Spirit, and that they can accomplish nothing of real value apart from him (John 15:5). This conscious reminding can happen through prayer, meditation, solitude, and worship, among other practices. Specifically, believers are called to remain in the *love* of Christ (John 15:9-10).

4. "G3306 - menō - Strong's Greek Lexicon (kjv)," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed 21 April 2022, <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3306/kjv/tr/0-1/>>.

5. Gary Burge, *Olive Tree NIV Application Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:1 “Bridging Contexts,” e-book.

6. Louis Berkhof, “The Mystical Union,” *Monergism*, <https://www.monergism.com/mystical-union-louis-berkhof>.

Of all the divine attributes possessed by Jesus—holiness, omnipotence, justice, etc.—I find it extremely comforting that the attribute in which we are specifically called to remain is his *love*.

The story of Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) is a good illustration, both negative and positive, of the subjective sense of remaining in Christ. These two sisters responded to Jesus' presence in their home in very different ways. Martha chose to focus on the details of food preparation, missing the opportunity for communion with Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, "sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said" (Luke 10:39). While Martha's decision wasn't morally wrong, Jesus' commendation of Mary shows which sister made the wiser choice: "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). I believe we can say that Mary was commended for remaining in Christ.

In my personal walk with the Lord, I have appreciated this subjective aspect of remaining in Christ most often in times of challenge or need. Finding myself in some difficult life situation and realizing my inability to handle it in my own strength, I turn to Jesus with a sense of utter dependence, confess my weakness, and invite him to fill me with his life and produce supernatural fruit through me.

A brief personal example is how I handle (and sometimes mishandle) the occasional marital tension that occurs between my wife and me. We have a very healthy and loving marriage of thirty-three years and counting, but we are both sinners and at times find ourselves butting heads. There have been moments when I have become exasperated to the point of anger, and I feel like I am utterly out of patience. At those moments, the only options that seem viable are actions that will further hurt our relationship: verbally attacking her, defending myself, or withdrawing as an act of passive aggression. It is at those moments of desperation

that I have often stepped into another room (under the guise of a bathroom or snack break!) and cried out to God in utter need, asking him to fill me with the life and character of Christ. Those desperate prayers are really requests for a more secure attachment to the Vine, in recognition that this is my only hope for any redeeming results in the current situation. And on more occasions than I can count, I have found myself continuing the interaction with my wife with newfound patience and a softened heart.

Like the Apostle Paul, I've learned that trials aren't random or outside the scope of God's sovereign plan. I can truly say of each challenge, "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9b). To "rely" is another way of saying "remain." Apart from him I can do nothing; joined with him, I find myself bearing fruit in the most difficult situations.

The Objective Sense of Remaining in Christ

For most of my Christian life, I believed that remaining in Christ consisted *only* in the mystical, subjective experience I just described. My role, I thought, was to continue reminding myself, through conscious focus, prayer, and meditation, that I was utterly dependent on Christ. But the more I have read John 15, the more I have realized I was missing an important element—a more objective one. I see now that in order to remain in Christ and experience the benefits of that union, there are specific actions that Jesus invites me to take.

Receiving and retaining Jesus' words

Before returning to John 15, I will briefly revisit the account of Mary and Martha mentioned in the previous section. In Luke 10:39, Mary is commended by Jesus for sitting at the

Lord's feet, "listening to what he said." As obvious as this may sound, the reason Mary's choice was so wise was not simply because she was sitting at the feet of Jesus (experiencing his presence subjectively). It was also because she was *listening to what he said* (receiving his words objectively). Jesus was conveying objective information which it behooved Mary to hear. And whatever she heard, she apparently retained long afterwards, because Jesus said, "it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

I believe the invitation of Jesus in John 15 contains a similar objective element. It appears that in his call to remain in him, he is describing more than a mystical union; he is describing a concrete interaction where objective truth is conveyed, received, and acted on. We recognize this objective element, first of all, in the occurrence of the word "word" twice in the passage.

The first appearance of "word" is in verse 3. I will begin the quotation with verse 2b: "...every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the **word** I have spoken to you." Here the Greek term for "word" is λόγος. Strong defines λόγος as "something said (including the thought); by implication, a topic (subject of discourse)."⁷ Through certain truth that Jesus has conveyed to his disciples ("the word I have spoken to you"), they have been spiritually "pruned" or "cleaned" ("pruned" and "cleaned" are from the same Greek root, καθα-). Mounce explains: "The means by which pruning or cleaning is done is the Word of God. It condemns sin; it inspires holiness; it promotes growth. As Jesus applied the words God gave him to the lives of the disciples, they

7. "G3056 - logos - Strong's Greek Lexicon (kjv)," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed 21 April 2022, <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3056/kjv/tr/0-1/>>.

underwent a pruning process that removed evil from them and conditioned them for further service.”⁸

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we find an example of believers exhorted to receive the λόγος: “Let the message (λόγος) of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Col 3:16). This is a call to allow the message of Christ—the objective truths of his teaching—to be the concepts that shape our thinking, behavior, and interactions with one another. In terms of the Mary and Martha account, we can say that by sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him, Mary was letting the word of Christ dwell in her richly.

The other appearance of “word” in our John 15 passage appears in verse 7: “If you remain in me and my **words** remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Here, we find a different Greek term for *words*: ῥήματα. Strong defines ῥῆμα as “an utterance (individually, collectively or specially).”⁹ Although there is a great deal of overlap between λόγος and ῥῆμα, in many cases λόγος refers to an overall message, while ῥῆμα refers to a more specific utterance, or an utterance applied specifically to the hearer. For example, when Jesus was rebuffing the first of Satan’s wilderness temptations, he replied, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word (ῥῆμα) that comes from the mouth of God.” Consistent with

8. Robert Mounce, *Olive Tree Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:3, e-book.

9. “G4487 - rhēma - Strong's Greek Lexicon (kjk),” *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed 21 April 2022. <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4487/kjk/tr/0-1/>>.

this nuance in meaning, Jesus used specific, pointed quotations from God’s Word to respond to each of Satan’s provocations.

So according to John 15:7, remaining in Jesus includes the believer receiving and retaining the specific words of Jesus. In the words of Beasley-Murray: “If in vv 1-6 the emphasis is on faith that trusts in Christ, opens life to Christ, and remains in union with Christ, v 7 emphasizes remaining in the words of Christ, i.e., the revelation that he brought.”¹⁰ And when this is happening, Jesus promises that the believer’s prayers will be regularly answered in the affirmative. In the next section, I will discuss in much more detail the connection between remaining in Christ and a fruitful prayer life, which is one of the most rewarding benefits of Big Idea Devotions.

A broader theology of the role of Scripture in spiritual formation

Before we continue our exegesis of John 15:1-17, it is appropriate to go beyond the immediate context and offer a brief biblical theology of the role of the Word of God in spiritual formation.

In the chapter entitled “Shaped by the Word” in the multi-author book *Reformation Celebration*, David Currie points out that at the outset of history, it was the Word of God that gave shape to what was formless and filled up what was empty, as described in the first two

10. George Beasley-Murray, *Olive Tree Word Biblical Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:7-10, e-book.

chapters of Genesis. This shaping and filling could have conceivably been accomplished through other means, but God chose to do it through his spoken word.¹¹

Currie then extends this concept to spiritual formation: “The implication is that creation would have remained primordial chaos, without shape or content, apart from the Word of God. In a similar way, spirituality detached from the Word is chaotic, formless and empty.”¹² In other words, if we seek to grow spiritually without the guidance of Scripture, nothing of real spiritual substance will result. Currie summarizes this line of thought: “Spiritual formation can then be understood as continuing the pattern of creation in giving form and filling up. God’s Word is intended to keep forming humans into the image of God’s Son and to be the vehicle to keep filling humans with God’s Spirit.”¹³

To demonstrate the validity of this claim in a New Testament context, Currie directs us to 2 Corinthians 5:17, where we hear the good news that anyone in Christ becomes a “new creation.” And just like the original creation, we “new creations” are given shape and filled through the Word of God. Commenting on Romans 10:17, Currie explains, “Spiritual formation flows from faith that must rest on the word. Faith comes preeminently from hearing, not from seeing or from nonverbal mystical ecstasies.”¹⁴ There is simply no substitute for God’s Word in spiritual formation.

11. Currie, “Shaped,” 52.

12. Currie, “Shaped,” 52.

13. Currie, “Shaped,” 53.

14. Currie, “Shaped,” 55.

Some additional Scriptures can be added to Currie's excellent overview of the role of Scripture in spiritual formation. In the Old Testament, the book that devotes the most attention to the role of Scripture is the Psalms. The book opens with these words:

¹ Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
 or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
 and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3).

It is significant (and somewhat surprising) that at the very outset of Israel's worship manual, the blessed life is defined not by whether one properly worships or is passionately devoted to the Lord (although of course these will come into play soon enough in the Psalms); rather, the one who is truly blessed and prosperous is one who delights in and meditates on the Word of God!

Several chapters later we come to Psalm 19—a Psalm most beloved for its celebration of how creation reflects the glory of its Creator. But the second half of the Psalm explores the perfections of God's written Word.

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
 refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
 making wise the simple.
⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right,
 giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant,
 giving light to the eyes. (Psalm 19:7-8).

These words affirm that by devoting ourselves to the Scriptures, we receive refreshment in our souls, wisdom, joy in our hearts, and “light to our eyes,” which implies guidance and clarity as we make life decisions.

But these two Psalms are only a dim preview of the epic Psalm 119, which is not only the longest Psalm by far, but is completely devoted to the excellencies of God’s Word. In nearly every one of its 176 verses, Psalm 119 holds up the value of Scripture—which is referred to variously as God’s *law, decrees, statutes, commands, ways, precepts, commands, ordinances, promise*, and, his *Word*. Throughout the Psalm, the writer expresses a passionate delight in Scripture:

I rejoice in following your statutes
as one rejoices in great riches. (Psalm 119:14)

Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors. (Psalm 119:24)

Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long. (Psalm 119:97)

Why such delight? First of all, for their intrinsic value: they are the very words of God, and this fact alone makes them worthy of treasuring and prioritizing. But there is also a practical value: God’s Word produces desirable results in the life of the believer, many of which are named in the Psalm. According to Psalm 119, meditating on and obeying God’s laws and decrees contributes to our spiritual formation in several important ways.

First, the Word gives us *guidance* as we make decisions and navigate life:

I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path.
Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path. (Psalm 119:104-105)

Second, the Word provides *strength* and *peace* in life's challenges:

My soul is weary with sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word. (Psalm 119:28)

Great peace have those who love your law,
and nothing can make them stumble." (Psalm 119:165)

Third, rather than restricting and confining us, the Word brings *freedom* to those who follow it:

I will walk about in freedom,
for I have sought out your precepts. (Psalm 119:45)

Fourth, the Word brings *wisdom*:

I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts. (Psalm 119:100)

And finally, the Word of God produces *hope*:

Remember your word to your servant,
in which you have made me hope. (Psalm 119:49)

While this is certainly not an exhaustive listing, hopefully I have provided enough examples to show that Psalm 119 teaches that delighting in, meditating on, and obeying the Word of God contributes to numerous dimensions of the believer's spiritual formation.

Turning to the New Testament, we will examine three key passages on the role of Scripture in spiritual formation. The most foundational one is found in 2 Timothy 3:14-17,

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

With these words, Paul reminds his protégé of the double value of Scripture: it is the initial means of understanding the gospel message, experienced personally by Timothy when his exposure to Scripture, presumably through the witness of his mother and grandmother

(2 Timothy 1:5), led him to saving faith. But additionally, Scripture continues to be “useful” throughout the believer’s life: for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” ultimately equipping us for “every good work.” This implies that *without* the benefit of Scripture, believers will be incomplete in their fitness for holy living. As Timothy developed his understanding of his pastoral calling, this was a tremendously important concept to understand.

The next passage I will briefly examine is 1 Thessalonians 2:13: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.” In Paul’s commendation of the Thessalonian believers, he points specifically to their receptivity to the “word of God.” Although Paul may be referring in a general way to the evangelistic message conveyed to them, he seems to be emphasizing that his preaching was rooted in, and an accurate representation of, the actual words of Scripture. In fact, if Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica resembled his other evangelistic preaching as recorded in Acts, we can be fairly certain it was filled with verbatim quotes from Scripture. And the point is: this Word is “at work in you who believe.” As we just saw in 2 Timothy 3, this “work” includes teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, thoroughly equipping the recipients for the good works to which God had called them.

Finally, we turn to Hebrews 4. Here, the writer is explaining how resting in the finished work of Christ enables believers to enter God’s ultimate Sabbath rest. Because some of his readers were apparently resisting and missing out on this invitation, the writer reminds them of the authority and power of the Word on which the invitation was based:

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

As Leon Morris succinctly states, "'Living and active' shows that there is a dynamic quality about God's revelation. It does things."¹⁵ God's Word *does things!* In other words, to say that God's Word is "alive and active" implies that it is not simply a static truth that we can choose to act upon; it is a living truth that acts upon us. When we open ourselves to the Scriptures, we will find ourselves exposed, convicted, and enlightened in ways that no other power could accomplish.

Clearly, the witness of both Testaments is that the Word of God is an essential element in spiritual formation. Thus, returning to John 15, it is not surprising to see Jesus' emphasis on the role of the Word in experiencing spiritual intimacy. He makes it clear that the means of growth and fruit-bearing in a believer's life is not only spending time in the presence of God, or nurturing one's "mystical union" with Christ. It also involves something more objective: receiving and retaining the propositional content of his Word (λόγος and ῥῆμα). Therefore, our devotional practices must include a mechanism to clearly receive, understand, and retain the written Word of God, the Scriptures.

15. Leon Morris, *Olive Tree Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), Hebrews 4:12, e-book.

Why the Big Idea approach faithfully conveys the message of Scripture

In this thesis-project, I am making the case that using a Big Idea approach to Scripture in personal devotions is a practical, effective means of understanding, retaining and acting upon the message of Scripture. As mentioned in the first chapter, this approach begins with discerning two things from the biblical passage: a subject (*what is the passage talking about?*) and a complement (*what does the passage say about what it's talking about?*). Then, from the subject and complement, the practitioner of Big Idea Devotions composes a simple prayer, asking God for the grace to apply the truth of the passage. Why do I believe this is a legitimate and effective use of Scripture? A large part of the answer is pedagogical rather than theological: the Big Idea honors time-tested principles of learning (which will be discussed at length in the next chapter). But there is also theological support for such an approach, which I will discuss briefly here.

We may have an example of the Big Idea in God's self-disclosure to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. In this famous scene, Moses has asked God to show him his glory, and in response God has placed Moses in the cleft of a rock. Finally the moment arrives:

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Of this passage, Dane Ortlund writes, "Short of the incarnation itself, this is perhaps the high point of divine revelation in all the Bible."¹⁶ Ortlund goes on to defend that point by

16. Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 145.

pointing out how frequently that text is cited in other Old Testament passages, listing fourteen such places.¹⁷ Think about the significance of this brief interaction: of all the things God could have communicated to Moses at that moment, he chose to limit his words to the content of these two short verses. Do these words communicate every detail there is to know about the character and ways of God? Of course not! The Old Testament is filled with additional details about who God is. But these verses effectively encapsulate the truth of who God is. In other words, it is not an *exhaustive* description, but it is *accurate*. I would humbly suggest that in this encounter, God gave Moses (and through Moses, gave his people) a Big Idea about his identity—one that the prophets of Israel returned to time and time again in the years to come.

In the New Testament, we have another possible example of a Big Idea, this time in the teaching of Jesus. In Matthew 22, Jesus is asked by a Pharisee what the greatest commandment in the law is. In response, Jesus replies: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Notice that in his reply, Jesus goes beyond the questioner’s request in two ways. First, he provides not just one “greatest” command, but a “second-greatest” command as well. But more importantly for this discussion, he gives an explanation for *why* these two commands are the most essential: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” In other words, loving the Lord and loving our neighbor don’t sit atop a list of other commands from which they are isolated and unrelated; they’re important precisely because they effectively

17. Ortland, *Gentle and Lowly*, 145.

encapsulate every other command God has given! So again, I humbly propose that this teaching, known as “the Great Commandment,” is an excellent example of a Big Idea: a clear, memorable statement that accurately summarizes a larger body of information.

One more example: in his seminal book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson asserts that when we examine the preaching of the apostles, we see that they employed some form of a Big Idea approach in their communication: “The sermons of the apostles were without exception the proclamation of a single idea directed toward a particular audience.”¹⁸ To support this claim, Robinson refers to the work of Donald Sunjukian:

Donald R. Sunukjian concluded that “each of Paul’s messages is centered around one simple idea or thought. Each address crystallizes into a single sentence which expresses the sum and substance of the whole discourse. Everything in the sermons...leads up to, develops, or follows from a single unifying theme.”

This assessment of Paul’s preaching could apply to every sermon in Acts. Each idea receives different treatment by the apostolic preacher. In Acts 2, for instance, on the day of Pentecost Peter stood before an antagonistic audience and, to gain a hearing, preached an inductive sermon. His idea is not stated until the conclusion: “Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36 NASB). In Acts 13, on the other hand, Paul used a deductive arrangement. His major idea stands at the beginning of the sermon, and the movements that follow amplify and support it. The statement found in verse 23 declares, “God, according to the promise, has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus.”

In Acts 20, when the apostle addressed the Ephesian elders, his structure was both inductive and deductive. First Paul drew from his own life an example of care for the church; then he warned in verse 28, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock” (NASB). Having stated that central thought, Paul went on to explain it and apply it to the leaders seated before

18. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), loc 438, Kindle.

him. Not all the sermons in Acts develop in the same way, but each develops a central unifying concept.¹⁹

Therefore, if we acknowledge that the preaching of the apostles was both biblical and effective, we see that the use of simple statements to encapsulate larger block of teaching is a legitimate method. Granted, these examples from Acts are instances of using a Big Idea approach in *preaching*. However, Big Idea Devotions are simply an extension of Big Idea Preaching: in our personal meetings with God, we are essentially “preaching to ourselves!”

So we see from God’s self-disclosure to Moses, the Great Commandment of Jesus, and the preaching of the apostles in Acts that there is biblical precedence for the use of a Big Idea in communication. The fact that this approach was employed at some of the most important moments in biblical history lends it further credibility. Therefore, I believe that when we use the Big Idea method in our devotional meetings with God, we are on solid theological ground.

Obeying Jesus’ commands

Returning to John 15, the objective sense of remaining in Christ contains one further element. It’s not enough to merely receive, understand, and retain the words of Jesus; truly remaining in Christ involves *obeying his commands*. In John 15:10 Jesus says, “If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” As heartwarming as it is to emphasize the love of Christ, let’s not miss the condition for being fruitfully attached to his love: walking in obedience to his commands!

19.Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), loc 438-447, Kindle, quoting Donald R. Sunukjian, “Patterns for Preaching: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Sermons of Paul in Acts 13, 17, and 20,” 176.

Throughout salvation history, obedience to God's commands has always been a central element of the covenant relationship. After rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, one of the first events in establishing them as his chosen people was giving them the Law and calling them to obey it—a call to which that the Israelite people agreed: “When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the LORD has said we will do’” (Deut 24:3). Later in Deuteronomy, the people are formally presented with the option of obedience or disobedience to God's commands and assured that obedience will lead to being blessed and disobedience will lead to being cursed (Deut 27-30).

Under the New Covenant, even though the demands of the Law have been fulfilled in Christ's perfect life, death and resurrection, the expectation of obeying God's commands remains. Jesus begins his well-known teaching on the wise and foolish builders in this way: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46) In other words, the very definition of “Lord” carries with it the implication of submitting oneself to another, which is shown most obviously in obedience. Jesus goes on to depict the starkly different outcomes for those who put his words into practice and those who don't: a life (“house”) that can withstand the storms of life, or a life that collapses in the storms (Luke 6:48-49). Obedience to Jesus matters greatly.

Later, when Jesus shocks his disciples by taking on the role of a servant and washing their feet at the Last Supper, he charges them to follow his example of serving and concludes the teaching moment with this admonition: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17). Once again, the promised blessing is contingent on the disciples' obedience to the command of Jesus.

One more New Testament example will suffice. The book of James is essentially an entire letter explaining how genuine biblical faith includes appropriate acts of obedience. At one point in the letter, James uses a memorable illustration to warn us of danger of failing to obey the commands of Scripture, and the blessing that results when people obey what they've read in the Word of God:

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:22-25).

In summary, it is clear throughout Scripture that walking in right relationship with God involves obeying his commands in our everyday lives. Of course, no one is capable of perfect obedience, and whenever we fall short the gospel provides us with the grace of confession and forgiveness through the atoning sacrifice and ongoing advocacy of Christ (1 John 1:8 - 2:2). But God calls us to a life of demonstrating our love for him by choosing to obey what he has commanded, and Jesus clearly includes this in his invitation to remain in him.

The primacy of the command to love

But Jesus is not content to call us to a general obedience of his commands. In John 15, he intentionally emphasizes a certain kind of command: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12). He goes on to describe the kind of love he's talking about: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends” (John 15:13). So, the kind of love Jesus commands us to demonstrate is a love that sacrifices itself for the good of the

beloved, which Jesus was about to do on the cross. And lest we forget this emphasis on love, he closes the entire section with this: “This is my command: Love each other” (John 15:17).

This emphasis on the command to love, clearly echoing what Jesus said earlier in this discourse about the defining mark of a disciple (John 13:34-35), is an important safeguard against the tendency of some people when it comes to our walk with the Lord. For some of us who are wired as scholarly and/or introverted, there is sometimes a tendency to assess our spiritual walk in very isolated terms. For example, I can tell myself that all is well in my relationship with God if I have a consistent devotional life that results in increased Bible knowledge, prayer, and even intentional obedience to God’s commands. This is all well and good, but completely neglects the communal nature of discipleship. Jesus is reminding us that our obedience should manifest itself *most clearly* in our love for other people, especially for fellow believers. If this is not occurring, we are not truly remaining in Christ.

From servants to friends

In order to fully understand the kind of obedience to which Jesus is calling us, one more element needs to be pointed out. In John 15:15, Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” In other words, the kind of obedience Jesus calls us to is not the slavish obedience of a servant; it is the glad, willing, obedience of a dear friend. In the Scriptures there is precedent for calling someone a “friend of God,” but only in one or two cases: Abraham is plainly called a “friend of God” (2 Chron 20:7, Isaiah 41:8), and such a designation is implied for Moses, with whom the Lord would speak

“face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Ex 33:11). Clearly, it’s an honor to be counted among such elite company!

But what is the criterion for someone qualifying as a “friend?” In the thinking of Jesus, the difference is the level of confidence extended by the command-giver to the command-receiver. Servants are regarded as tools to be used by the master; they are not given any reason or explanation for the commands they receive—their role is simply to obey. But with friends, the command-giver confides his reasons and motives with the one receiving the commands. As we saw in the Upper Room Discourse and the broader Farewell Discourse, Jesus has opened up his heart to his disciples in an extraordinarily thorough and vulnerable way. In fact, Jesus asserts that he has held nothing back, confiding in his disciples (and, by extension, to us) “everything I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). Amazingly, the level of transparency normally reserved for one’s closest confidants is extended by Jesus to his disciples (and, by extension, to us!).

Knowing that we are regarded as friends of Jesus should deeply affect how we respond to his commands. As John explains in his first epistle, “his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Rather, we have the privilege of joyfully and willingly partnering with Jesus in his work, carrying the “light burden” of walking in his ways and sharing the “easy yoke” with Jesus himself (Matthew 11:30). None of this changes the fact that we are called to obedience! But it’s an obedience that’s more beautiful and enjoyable than in any other relationship.

Encountering the Living Word Through the Written Word

The fact that Jesus' invitation to remain in him contains both a subjective and an objective element shouldn't surprise us, because there is an inseparable connection between the written Word of God and the living Word of God. The opening sentences of Hebrews express it like this: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe" (Heb 1:102). This passage draws a clear parallel between the speaking of God through prophetic utterances, including Scripture, and the "speaking" of God through Jesus. Both are the Word of God, accurately conveying God's truth.

Part of the blindness of the Pharisees was their unwillingness to see this unity between the Scriptures and Jesus: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). The Pharisees were correct in believing they could find eternal life in the written Word; they were unwilling (or unable) to see that Jesus was the living embodiment of that same Word.

One other New Testament passage that strongly connects Jesus the living Word with the written Word is Romans 10:5-8. Tom Smith offers an enlightening explanation of this passage, in which Paul is expounding Deuteronomy 30:12-14. In Smith's words:

Moses' concluding word to God's people concerned God's law being near to them, in their mouth and in their heart, such that it was not necessary to go up to heaven to bring it near nor to go across the sea to bring it to them. However, when Paul expounded this word, he applied it to Christ. That is, we do not need to ascend to into heaven, that is to bring Christ down, referring to His incarnation. He already came down (John 6:33). Nor, do we

need to descend into the abyss (the lower parts of the earth into which Christ descended after His death and from which He ascended in His resurrection) to bring Christ up from the dead. He has already been raised (Acts 2:24)! Then Paul repeats Moses by saying that the word is near you in your heart and in your mouth. In so doing he is indicating that the word is interchangeable with Christ.²⁰

R.E. Brown states the same truth more succinctly: "Jesus and his revelation are virtually interchangeable, for he is incarnate revelation."²¹

In other words, the reason the New Testament refers to Jesus as "the Word" is not simply to show how he fulfills the λόγος concept from Greek philosophy (although that's certainly one of the reasons, especially in the first chapter of John's Gospel). Jesus is being presented as the very communication of God's eternal truth in tangible, human form. So, remaining in Jesus is impossible apart from the written Word. Conversely, we cannot rightly understand the written Word apart from a relationship with Jesus. Therefore, as we regularly receive the written Word of God in our daily devotional practices, we won't simply be learning objective spiritual truths; through the intake of Scripture, we'll be encountering the living Jesus Christ, abiding in his presence and choosing the better part, just as Mary did. Surely, this raises daily devotions to an exalted level of importance!

To summarize: Jesus' invitation to "remain in him" contains both a subjective and objective element. Subjectively, we are called to live out the reality of our mystical union with Christ: consciously reckoning ourselves, through prayer, focus, and meditation, as vitally

20. Tom Smith, "Enjoying Christ as the Living Word in the Written Word," *Holding to Truth in Love* blog, <https://holdingtotruth.com/2011/04/22/enjoying-christ-as-the-living-word-in-the-written-word/>.

21. R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 2:662. Cited in George Beasley-Murray, *Olive Tree Word Biblical Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:7, e-book.

connected with him and unable to do anything worthwhile without him. Objectively, as beloved friends of Jesus, we are called to receive and obey his commands, especially his supreme command to love one another.

The greatest value of Big Idea Devotions is that it provides an intentional mechanism for the objective element of remaining in Christ: a systematic approach to receiving the Word of God in a form that the believer can remember long after the devotional hour is over. Far from being an academic exercise, this discipline is a practical way to live out one's status as a friend of Jesus: starting our day by sitting at his feet and listening to him, and then taking what we've heard with us as our guiding voice throughout the day.

The Results of Remaining in Christ

A Life of Bearing Fruit

Jesus promises that when we remain in him, we will “bear much fruit” (John 15:5). What does this mean? In a negative sense, it's a reminder that branches are incapable of bearing fruit if they are not well connected to the vine; Jesus states this explicitly in John 15:4. So, whatever Jesus means by “fruit” in a spiritual sense, we won't produce any without remaining in him. And positively, it reminds us that when branches *are* well connected with the vine, fruit will be the inevitable result, simply because the life-giving substance of the vine flows through them. So, the spiritual fruit Jesus is talking about will naturally be produced in our lives; our job is to simply remain in him (through the subjective and objective means described in the previous section).

But what exactly is the “fruit” Jesus is talking about? The concept of fruit-bearing appears frequently in Scripture, from the very beginning. After the creation of Adam and Eve,

God gives them this charge: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). Here, “fruitfulness” represents multiplication through procreation. By having children, Adam and Eve were to populate the earth with more divine image-bearers who would, in turn, have children.

Another key passage is found in the opening words of the Psalter:

“Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.” (Psalm 1:1-3)

Here, “fruit” clearly represents something different from the physical propagation expected of Adam and Eve. Although the Psalmist doesn’t specifically define it, he is speaking of something good, alive, and growing—an ability, in the midst of hard circumstances (things that might cause leaves to wither) to thrive and prosper.²² In Jeremiah 17:7-8, we find a very similar sense of “fruit”: the person who trusts the Lord “never fails to bear fruit,” manifesting healthy, life-giving growth even in extreme circumstances like heat and drought.

Another passage that helps inform our understanding of “fruit” is found in Isaiah 5, as mentioned earlier. God depicted Israel as a vineyard that he planted in their land, with the desire that they would bear fruit. In Isaiah 5:7, the fruit God looks for (but doesn’t find) is defined as “justice” and “righteousness.” “Justice” (מִשְׁפָּט) implies a life of treating other people

22. It should also be noted that in the first Psalm, the production of fruit arises specifically from a person who delights in and meditates on the *law* of the LORD—God’s written Word. At the very outset of Israel’s manual for worship, God is establishing the central role played by the Scriptures!

fairly and rightly, and “righteousness” (צִדְקָה) implies conducting oneself in personal holiness and moral virtue. So, in this context, “fruit” is manifested in a believer’s relationships and personal life.

Turning to the New Testament, Jesus speaks of fruit in the parable of the soils (Matthew 13). While the exact meaning of “fruit” is not specified, Hagner makes a reasonable suggestion based on the context of Matthew: “The fruit is probably to be understood as the pattern of conduct described in the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), i.e., the living out of the kingdom of God here and now (cf. 5:13-16; 21:43).”²³ If this interpretation is correct, we have another example of “fruit” representing a general result of desirable, healthy spiritual growth in a believer’s life, in alignment with God’s kingdom values.²⁴

In the epistles, the most well-known appearance of “fruit” is found in Galatians 5, where Paul specifically defines the “fruit of the Spirit” as *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* (Gal 5:22-23). So here, fruit represents character attributes that the Holy Spirit produces in a believer’s life, contrasted with the destructive “acts of the flesh” (Gal 5:19-21). While the acts of the flesh are “what comes naturally,” the Holy Spirit enables us to manifest a life that is beautifully supernatural.

But we can also point to a more quantitative meaning of the word “fruit” in the epistles. In Colossians 1:6 we read: “In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout

23. Donald Hagner, *Olive Tree Word Biblical Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), Matthew 13:20-23, e-book.

24. And once again, Jesus defines the seed sown by the farmer as the λόγος—rendered in the NIV as the “word” or “message”—which is yet another reminder that fruitfulness results from receptivity to the objective Word of God.

the whole world.” Here, “fruit” most likely represents numerical growth, as more and more people believed the gospel and the first-century church continued to grow in number. Just as Adam and Eve had been commanded to multiply in number, the church received a similar commission from the risen Christ (Matt 28:18-20), and in Colossians, Paul celebrates the fact that this commission was being fulfilled.

To summarize thus far: throughout Scripture “fruit” represents that which is produced through a person’s life. In some cases, that fruit represents numerical growth (physical or spiritual); in other cases, the fruit represents moral, character growth. In either case, what is produced is considered a blessing: it is good, healthy, beneficial to others, and pleasing to God.

Against that scriptural backdrop, what does Jesus mean by “fruit” in John 15? Beasley-Murray makes the case that Jesus intends both the qualitative and quantitative sense of “fruit”:

If we are to ask what fruitbearing signifies, the broad answer of Bultmann is adequate: "every demonstration of vitality of faith, to which, according to vv 9-17, reciprocal love above all belongs" (532-33); we may add, in the light of v 16, "to which also effective mission in bringing to Christ men and women in repentance and faith belongs."²⁵

However, the same author later argues that Jesus’ emphasis is on the quantitative aspects of fruit: “While the general scope of fruitbearing...obtains here, the employment of ἔθηκα ("I have set you aside") and ὑπάγῃτε ("that you should go forth") suggests that the sending of the disciples on mission is to the fore here..."²⁶ In other words, Beasley-Murray is

25. George Beasley-Murray, *Olive Tree Word Biblical Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:5, e-book; includes citation from Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell), 1971, 532-33.

26. George Beasley-Murray, *Olive Tree Word Biblical Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:1-17, e-book.

asserting that in his promise of fruitfulness, Jesus is primarily assuring the disciples that if they remain in him, they will be effective in spreading the gospel and making disciples.

If Beasley-Murray is correct in this assertion, this would have special significance for the devotional lives of pastors. Just as the disciples of Jesus were set aside to go forth to evangelize and grow the church, pastors have a similar calling. And just as the disciples' effectiveness in accomplishing this charge would be enhanced by their remaining in Christ, so will ours. In other words, as we continue nurturing intimacy with God through the daily practice of remaining in Christ—subjectively and objectively—we pastors will find ourselves with supernatural power in the evangelistic encounters that God places before us. This likely means we'll recognize those opportunities, engage in them expectantly, and see many come to faith in Christ.

To summarize, Jesus' promise of fruit-bearing for those who remain in him contains both a qualitative and quantitative element. Qualitatively, remaining in Christ will produce growth in character virtues such as the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), which we could never muster on our own. And quantitatively, remaining in Christ will make us more effective in the evangelistic work to which all believers, and especially we pastors, have been called. The benefits of remaining in Christ are broad and robust, affecting some of the most significant and lasting areas of human life.

In addition, the benefits of fruit-bearing go beyond changes in the believer. In John 15:8, Jesus says, "This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." When we remain in Christ and consequently bear fruit, God is glorified! The word for glorified, δοξάζω, means "to render (or esteem) glorious (in a wide application):—(make)

glorify(-ious), full of (have) glory, honour, magnify.”²⁷ As others see the beautiful character change occurring in our lives and the effective outreach in which we are engaged, all as a result of our abiding union with Christ, they will recognize us as disciples of Jesus and their regard for God will grow stronger. This is essential to bear in mind because our incentive for remaining in Christ is more than the personal benefits we’ll receive; ultimately it is a way of life that will bring glory and honor to the God we serve!

A life of answered prayer

In addition to the promise of fruitfulness, Jesus assures believers of another benefit of remaining in him. Twice in this teaching (verses 7 and 16), Jesus promises that those who remain in him will find their prayers being granted by God. Let’s examine both instances.

In verse 7, he promises, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” The main point to clarify is the meaning of “ask whatever you wish.” Does this mean that if we remain in Christ, we have a carte blanche invitation to impose our will on God and expect that he’ll grant our wishes? Taking into consideration the immediate context and the broader New Testament teaching on prayer, the answer is clearly “no.” Prayer is never presented as an imposition of our will on God, and that is not the implication here.

Instead, the very practice of remaining in Christ changes our priorities and desires, which in turn changes the content of our prayers. Through our constant receiving of his Word,

27. "G1392 - doxazō - Strong's Greek Lexicon (esv)," *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed 20 May 2022, <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1392/esv/mgnt/0-1/>>.

we begin to desire the things he desires. Burge explains: “Those whose lives are so in harmony with Jesus will find their prayers controlled by his word, and such prayers will be answered and bring added glory to God.”²⁸ Mounce concurs: “He was not promising to gratify every chance whim. But so long as the believer was seeking the Lord's will in his life, Jesus would grant every request that would help accomplish this end.”²⁹

This interpretation is consistent with the teaching on prayer found in 1 John 5:14-15, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.” The promise of answered prayer is qualified by the words “according to his will.” At first this may appear unappealing and almost offensive, i.e., “God will answer your prayers as long as you deny what you really want and ask him only for things that he wants.” But the teaching of John 15 paints a delightfully different picture: as we consistently remain in Christ, we begin to genuinely desire and long for the same things that God values. And as we pray for those things, we will have the pleasure of seeing those prayers granted.

The second version of the “answered prayer” promise is found in John 15:16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.” Here, the qualifier of prayer changes from “whatever you wish” (verse 7) to “whatever you ask in my

28. Gary Burge, *Olive Tree NIV Application Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:7, e-book.

29. Robert Mounce, *Olive Tree Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:7, e-book.

name.” In the previous chapter, Jesus made a similar promise: “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

What does it mean to pray “in his name?” Does it imply that believers may ask for literally any whim, and it will be granted as long as they tack on the formula “in Jesus’ name?” Burge offers a satisfying answer:

To be a branch, to be a disciple, does not mean that we can make some claim on the vine and demand it to produce what we wish. Prayer “in my name” is not a formula that guarantees we will get what we want. Centuries of Christian experience bear this out. But prayer that is itself inspired by the spiritual presence of Jesus, that is in harmony with his will, that is in accord with what he is doing in nurturing the vineyard — this prayer will succeed.³⁰

In other words, prayer in Jesus’ name means that we ask the Father for the things that align with the values of Jesus’ kingdom. Indeed, we pray for things that we believe Jesus himself would pray for if he found himself in the life situation in which we find ourselves. So, the phrase “in Jesus’ name” is not a magic formula; in fact, praying in Jesus’ name doesn’t necessarily mean we even use the words “in Jesus’ name”! Rather, it is defining the values, priorities, and purposes that motivate our prayers: all must flow from our submission to Christ’s authority and our passion for his will to be done.

Let’s not miss the awesome nature of this promise of answered prayer! What a joy to be engaged in an ever-deepening intimacy with God, through remaining in Christ, which radically shapes our prayer life. Each day in our devotions, as we receive God’s clear Word through

30. Gary Burge, *Olive Tree NIV Application Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software, Inc., 2020), John 15:16, e-book.

Scripture, we will find ourselves lifting up prayers for ourselves and those we love that are informed by the truth of that day's Scripture. And over time, as our thinking becomes increasingly saturated and formed by Scripture, we will find all our prayers—not just those prayed during our devotional hour—being shaped by the mind of God as revealed through his Word. And since Scripture-shaped prayers are much more likely to be aligned with God's will, we will have the joy of seeing more and more of our prayers granted by God. What a thrill to live as true friends of Jesus, partnering with him in advancing his kingdom and bringing glory to God!

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jesus' teaching on remaining in the vine provides rich instruction about how believers can experience deep intimacy with God. The invitation to remain in Christ includes both a subjective element (consciously experiencing our mystical union with Jesus) and an objective element (receiving and obeying his commands, especially the command to love one another). And the results of remaining in Christ are a life of fruit-bearing (both the quantitative fruit of effective evangelism and the qualitative fruit of godly character) and a life of answered prayer, as our prayers become shaped by the priorities of God's Word.

In my personal experience, the practice of Big Idea Devotions has helped me to put this teaching of Jesus into practice in a very practical way. In short, using the Big Idea approach helps me in three specific ways, which I will summarize as *stay*, *pray*, and *obey*.

First, it helps the message of the day's Scripture reading *stay* with me throughout the day. Because the Big Idea devotional prayer that I compose each morning is brief and memorable, I am able to call it to mind (sometimes cheating by peaking at the Notes app on my

phone, but usually not!). In other words, this method helps the words of Jesus to “remain in me” throughout the day and beyond (John 15:4-7). For this alone, the Big Idea method is worthwhile. Unlike James’ forgetful mirror-gazer (James 1:22-25), I rarely walk away and forget what I’ve read!

Second, it helps me *pray*, for myself and others, much more biblically. As Jesus said, when we remain in him and his words remain in us, our prayer life is radically affected (John 15:7, 16). The Big Idea Devotions approach involves using the Big Idea devotional prayer as the guide in praying for ourselves and for the others on our prayer list. Instead of praying random prayers of blessing, I find myself praying prayers that have biblical “teeth”—asking God to give each person the grace to live out the day’s teaching. In the past, I would often find my prayers repetitive and unimaginative; now they are as fresh as God’s Word to me through Scripture each day. And because these prayers tend to be aligned with God’s will, I often have the joy of seeing them answered.

And third, Big Idea Devotions help me *obey* the teaching of God in a more explicit, intentional way. As I call to mind the Big Idea devotional prayer and meditate on it throughout the day, I am repeatedly presented with the opportunity to do what Jesus said his friends do: obey his commands (John 15:14). Very often, I find the day’s teaching to be suited perfectly for the specific challenges of that day. This does not make obedience automatic! There is still a decision to be made, and I battle with the flesh regularly. But the Big Idea approach has helped me to clarify what God is calling me to do in a given moment. As someone who has walked with God for 35 years and served as a pastor for 25, I am struck by how this approach to spiritual

intimacy, which I have discovered only a short while ago, has brought clarity and vitality to the way I obey the commands of God.

In John 15:11, Jesus says, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” Through Big Idea Devotions, I am tasting that joy regularly, and through this project, I’m eager to help others taste it for themselves.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Our churches need under-shepherds who understand themselves first and foremost to be sheep in pursuit of this Great Shepherd, and who lead out of devotion to Him.” (Mike Gilbert-Smith)¹

Introduction

Having established a theological foundation for the value of Big Idea Devotions, we now turn to a review of the relevant literature. The literature on spiritual formation and personal devotions is vast and spans the history of the church, so I will limit this section to exploring four major categories which bear directly on the project at hand: The Pastoral Struggle for Intimacy with God, The Primacy of the Word in Intimacy with God, The Unexplored Value of the Big Idea in Personal Devotions, and Some Cautions in Using a Big Idea Approach to Devotions.

The Pastoral Struggle for Intimacy with God

Jeffrey Garner, in his excellent thesis-project, offers a helpful definition of spiritual intimacy: “Spiritual intimacy fuses honesty, trust, vulnerability, acceptance, secrecy, and dependability in a loving committed relationship between Savior and sinner.”² This definition is very similar, if not identical, to how we would define intimacy in a human relationship, and it

1. Mike Gilbert-Smith, “The Pursuit of Christ in the Devotions of a Pastor,” 9Marks (Feb. 26, 2021): <https://www.9marks.org/article/pursuit-christ-devotions-pastor/>.

2. Jeffrey C. Garner, “Reflections on the Spiritual Intimacy of the Pastor Using the Beloved Disciple as Model: Interviews with Ministers” (DMin Thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2003), 10, Theological Research Exchange Network.

aligns well with the Vine/Branch relationship Jesus describes in John 15. It is the kind of mutual, dynamic, living, breathing relationship that all of us were designed to experience with God.

Having served as a pastor for more than 25 years, I am personally familiar with the challenge of maintaining this type of relationship with God amidst the demands of ministry. I have enjoyed seasons when I've had a strong devotional life, and other seasons that were more dry and difficult. I have also observed that many other pastors experience a similar inconsistency. Garner quotes Gerald Borchert, a fellow pastor: "The honors and degrees I received from several seminaries were not nearly as hard to gain as was a steady cultivation of my walk with the Lord who called me to ministry."³ From everything I've experienced and seen, Borchert is in good company.

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, a recent study revealed that only 16% of American pastors are "very satisfied" with their personal prayer lives.⁴ This would be concerning enough for the general Christian population; it is particularly alarming for pastors, whose spiritual walk is essential for the integrity, power, and longevity of their ministries.

To help us understand the objective effect that lack of pastoral spiritual intimacy can have, Garner points to the work of Donald Hands and Wayne Fehr, who directed the St.

Barnabas Center in Wisconsin:

Drawing on five years of ministry to over 400 clergy admitted for addiction, compulsivity, depression and burnout Hands and Fehr conclude that spiritual intimacy is the genuine "need above all today." On page 13 they

3. Gerald L. Borchert, "Identifying and Cultivating Spiritual Giftedness," *Preparing for Christian Ministry: an Evangelical Approach*, eds. David Gushee and Walter Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1996), 95, quoted in Garner, "Reflections on the Spiritual Intimacy of the Pastor," 6.

4. "Most Pastors Unsatisfied with Their Personal Prayer Lives," Baptist Press (June 6, 2005): (<https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/most-pastors-unsatisfied-with-their-personal-prayer-lives/>).

state, "Nearly all the clergy who have come to us for treatment of emotional disorders and/or addictions have also been suffering from a spiritual malaise," with scarcely any genuine personal relationship to [God]. They have either never felt deeply and personally the truths they proclaim, or they have gradually drifted away...." ⁵

It is highly significant that lack of spiritual intimacy is regularly associated with these unhealthy life issues. What is even more remarkable is that Hands and Fehr concluded that spiritual malaise is actually a *causal* factor in these troubling life issues, *and* that it is often the demands of ministry itself that contribute to the spiritual malaise:

Hands and Fehr concluded that lack of spiritual intimacy contributed to clergy addictions and compulsions, and contrary to popular presupposition, ministry itself often hinders the spiritual intimacy of the pastor: "The experience of intimacy is the core of health and salvation. Where intimacy is nurtured and experienced, there is no room for addictiveness and compulsivity. Paradoxically, the pressures of providing for the spiritual needs of others can often work against the health and growth of the minister's own spiritual life."⁶

This raises the issue to a whole new level of concern: for pastors, spiritual intimacy is both uniquely challenging *and* uniquely important. As a trusted mentor of mine often says, "Pastors are like everyone else, only more so."⁷ So as pastors, we cannot afford to allow this area of our lives to slip; the consequences are too important. In the words of John Owen, "A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more."⁸

5. Garner, "Spiritual Intimacy of the Pastor," footnote on p. 5.

6. Donald R. Hands and Wayne L Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy: a New Psychology of Intimacy with God, Self and Others* (Washington D.C.: Alban Institute, 1993), xviii, quoted in Garner, "Reflections on the Spiritual Intimacy of the Pastor," 5.

7. Dr. David Currie, student notes from DMin residencies, 2019-2022.

8. John Owen, cited in I.D.E. Thomas, *A Puritan Golden Treasury* (Banner of Truth, 1977), 192, quoted in Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 22.

One more finding in Garner's work is worth noting. When he interviewed pastors for his thesis-project,

...the majority (13/15) of the interviewees believed a minister could have a 'successful' ministry and not have an intimate walk with God. Most interviewees not only confirmed but defended this position by saying that it happens all the time. The danger in all of this is that a minister can hide behind his successful ministry and never acknowledge or admit his waning relationship with God.⁹

That the majority of the pastors in his project would assert the possibility of a "successful" ministry being carried out by a spiritually disconnected pastor is chilling to me. However, I choose to let their brutal honesty serve as a personal challenge. The demands of ministry are so relentless, often occurring concurrently with other demands of family, aging, etc., that I don't consider myself immune from falling into this kind of spiritual dryness.

Ultimately, the most alarming warning about a lack of pastoral spiritual intimacy comes from Jesus himself. In Matthew 7:21-23, we see a preview of the shock that some spiritual leaders will experience on Judgment Day: Jesus will inform them that, in spite of all their spiritual activity, he never knew them. Robert Mulholland explains:

Jesus makes the relational the foundation of the functional. In doing this, Jesus makes a crucial distinction between "evil-doing" and "doing evil." "Doing evil" is doing that is contrary to the purposes of God. "Evil-doing," however, is doing that which is in harmony with the purpose of God...but doing it without a relationship with God..."¹⁰

God forbid that Jesus would look at the thousands of hours I am pouring into ministry and assess it as "evil-doing." This warning alone is enough to grab my attention and deepen my

9. Garner, "Reflections on the Spiritual Intimacy of the Pastor," 126.

10. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2001), 93.

resolve to lead from a place of spiritual integrity. In the words of Mike Gilbert-Smith, “Our churches need under-shepherds who understand themselves first and foremost to be sheep in pursuit of this Great Shepherd, and who lead out of devotion to Him.”¹¹ I could not agree more, and this is why I’m so grateful for the effect that Big Idea Devotions have had on my spiritual life. More than any other devotional approach that I’ve used, incorporating the Big Idea has helped my heart to receive and respond to the Word of God in a way that has deepened my love relationship with God, which in turn has enriched me as a disciple of Jesus and as a pastor.

The Primacy of the Word in Intimacy with God

Throughout the church’s history, wise spiritual leaders have emphasized the irreplaceable role of Scripture in pursuing intimacy with God. According to Mariano Magrassi, “...for the Fathers and monks there is no Christian life or Christian prayer that is not nourished daily—and in a certain sense exclusively—on Sacred Scripture.”¹² This is not to say that we achieve spiritual intimacy simply by reading the Bible; rather, it affirms that spiritual intimacy cannot be experienced apart from the Bible.

In the chapter entitled “Shaped by the Word” in the multi-author book *Reformation Celebration*, David Currie affirms the central role of Scripture in spiritual formation: “*Sola Scriptura* affirms a priority; indeed even more, a primacy, of the word as the foundation of spiritual formation resulting in believers becoming increasingly conformed to the image of

11. Gilbert-Smith, “The Pursuit of Christ.”

12. Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), viii.

Christ...Without [the Bible], we will grow increasingly out of step with the Spirit who breathed out the Scriptures, and stumble into spiritual malformation.¹³

But exactly *how* does God's Word shape us? The historical testimony of the church suggests two basic movements: *receiving* the Word and *responding* to the Word. Let's examine those in order.

Receiving God's Word

God spoke first. Therefore, as we think about meeting with God for a time of personal devotions, we'd be wise to give God the first "move" by beginning with a receptive posture. This priority of listening before speaking might sound obvious to anyone who understands the basics of healthy relationships, but the reality is that it needs to be stated and re-emphasized—especially when we are relating to the invisible God. In his excellent book *Prayer*, Timothy Keller writes, "'Hearing' always precedes asking. God comes to us first, or we would never reach out to him."¹⁴ And Currie writes, "Human involvement in the spiritual formation process is responsive, not generative, based in trusting acceptance of and cooperation in the work of the Triune God."¹⁵

So, in order to truly receive God's Word, we need to give attention to several things:

13. David A. Currie, "Shaped by the Word: Sola Scriptura for Spiritual Formation" in *Reformation Celebration: The Significance of Scripture, Grace, Faith, and Christ* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2018), 51.

14. Keller, *Prayer*, 46.

15. Currie, "Shaped," 51.

Preparing the heart

We are getting ready to meet with the holy, eternal God. Therefore, it's essential that we prepare our hearts for such a sacred encounter. Keller suggests that our first step in devotions should be "evocation," or calling on God, as a way of remembering who it is that we are about to speak with.¹⁶ Mulholland explains it like this: "With informational reading you can run in, sit down, pick up the book, and go at it. It doesn't require any prior preparation. Formational reading, however, requires time to 'center down,' to use the old Quaker phrase, to become still, to relinquish, to let go of your life in the presence of God."¹⁷ And in her book *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson suggests we adopt the attitude of the boy Samuel: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).¹⁸

This moment of heart preparation includes turning to God in prayerful dependence on God to open the eyes of our hearts. John Wesley wrote, "Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God; seeing 'Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given.'"¹⁹ For me personally, heart preparation usually entails about 60 seconds of closing my eyes, quieting my thoughts, breathing deeply, opening myself to the presence of God, and seeking his help. It is during this preparatory minute that I often feel a growing excitement and anticipation for the divine encounter to follow.

16. Keller, *Prayer*, 248.

17. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 60.

18. Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 22.

19. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 43.

Reading the text

With hearts prepared, we allow God to have the first word by reading a portion of Scripture. However, we don't approach this reading in the same way we would approach a news story, a novel, or even a personal email. Because we believe this is the God-breathed eternal Word (2 Timothy 3:16), we realize this moment has infinitely more gravitas. Eugene Peterson wrote, "Reading Scripture is not the same as listening to God."²⁰ So we read with an eager expectation of hearing the voice of God in the text.

Both Mulholland and Thompson contrast "informational" and "formational" reading, agreeing that we need to consciously resist our natural tendency to settle for informational reading, choosing instead to read in a way that leads to spiritual formation. These two approaches to Scripture reading can be summarized as follows:

Informational reading...

- seeks to cover as much as possible as quickly as possible.
- is linear.
- seeks to master the text. (We bring it under our control).
- views the text as an object "out there" for us to control and/or manipulate according to our own purposes, intentions, or desires.
- is analytical, critical, and judgmental.
- is characterized by a problem-solving mentality.²¹

20. Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) loc 838, Kindle.

21. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 51-53.

Speaking of this approach to reading, Mulholland explains, “We have a deeply ingrained way of reading in which we are the masters of the material we read.”²² He adds, “We control our approach to the text; we control our interaction with the text; we control the impact of the text upon our lives.”²³ We might even say that when we read Scripture informationally, we are removing God from the encounter and putting ourselves in his place. Instead of vulnerably opening ourselves to the mysterious, unpredictable activity of God, we are simply dealing with a unit of information. As we will discuss at length later in this chapter, getting stuck in this informational approach to Scripture-reading is a danger that we must consciously avoid when practicing Big Idea Devotions. Since the propositional content of God’s Word plays such an important role, we need to intentionally resist making information-attainment an end in itself.

By contrast, *formational reading*...

- avoids quantifying the amount of reading in any sort of way. You are concerned with quality, not quantity.
- is in-depth (rather than linear).
- allows the text to master you.
- takes the view that we are the object being shaped by the text.
- is humble, detached, receptive, and loving.
- instead of problem-solving, maintains openness to mystery. “...instead of coming to what we

22. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 19.

23. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 19.

read to find a solution for something else in our life, we come to be open to that mystery we call *God*.²⁴

The formational approach is referred to by various other names. Magrassi calls it “vital hearing,” and explains, “Vital hearing requires loving, calm, reflective, personal poring over the text.”²⁵ Thompson refers to it as “spiritual reading” when she writes, “Spiritual reading is reflective and prayerful. It is concerned not with speed or volume but with depth and receptivity. That is because the purpose of spiritual reading is to open ourselves to how God may be speaking to us in and through any particular text.”²⁶ And, “The manner of spiritual reading is like drinking in the words of a love letter or pondering the meaning of a poem. It is not like skittering over the surface of a popular journal or plowing through a computer manual. We are seeking formation, not merely information.”²⁷

For many of us, especially pastors, there is a danger inherent in having already read every word of Scripture many times, and likely having at some point studied and preached most passages. The danger, of course, is coming to a passage devotionally with a “been there, done that” mentality, closed off to any new insights or enlightenment. To combat that mindset, Thompson reminds us that formational reading “...entails reading each sentence as if for the first time, expecting that God will address you with a direct and personal message.”²⁸ And in order to make such an attitude a practical reality, Magrassi wisely enjoins one more important

24. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 55-59.

25. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 6.

26. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 18.

27. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 18.

28. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 23.

requirement, which he calls “contemplative calm,” in which “All hurry is excluded.”²⁹ It is becoming clear that reading the Bible formationally will require adopting some decidedly counterintuitive and countercultural practices!

Ben Johnson aptly describes the insufficiency of settling for information in our Scripture reading: “When we approach the text looking primarily for information, both scholarship in the academy and in the pastor’s study can give us vast knowledge about the husk and kernel of the texts, but no bread, no sustenance. When a person is starving, she is not interested in seed, fertilizer, and grain. She wants and needs bread.”³⁰ This helpful picture explains why many seminarians can spend hours parsing Greek verbs and exegeting complex texts, while remaining spiritually starving: they are expertly identifying the component parts of bread, but they never allow their hearts and minds to take the next step and receive the bread they need. This is an excellent caution for all pastors when we approach our devotional lives.

Having contrasted these two approaches to reading Scripture, it may be tempting to conclude that we should thoroughly reject every aspect of informational reading and strive to adopt only formational reading. However, a wiser view will perceive an important relationship between the two approaches, with at least some elements of informational reading serving as a doorway into the ultimate goal of formational reading. Mulholland explains, “If we come to the informational aspect of reading with this inner posture of openness to God, the informational task will then lead us to the formative dynamic.”³¹

29. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 105.

30. Ben Campbell Johnson, *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), loc 478-482, Kindle.

31. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 61.

Thompson further explains:

Thomas Merton offers a helpful perspective on the relationship between informational and formational approaches to scripture. An adequate grasp of the biblical text, he says, “requires two levels of understanding: first, a preliminary unraveling of the meaning of the texts themselves...which is mainly a matter of knowledge acquired by study; then a deeper level, a living insight which grows out of personal involvement and relatedness. ...Only on this second level is the Bible really grasped.” For Merton, the task of acquiring information is simply the “front porch” of spiritual reading.³²

To summarize thus far: after preparing our hearts to hear from God, we read a section of Scripture slowly, receptively, and expectantly. We seek to understand the objective message being conveyed, but we never view understanding that message as an end in itself; rather, we allow God to use the truth of the text as a doorway to experience, enjoy, worship and be shaped by him.

Meditating on the Text

I hesitated to make this a separate subsection, because meditation is so closely related to formational reading. But I am breaking it out separately to emphasize the fact that while meditation is part of receiving God’s Word, it takes place *following* the reading of the text. Thompson explains, “... meditation involves an active mind. The type of mental work is quite specific. It is not the critical, analytical, or formulating work of Bible study, which may inform meditation but remains distinct from it. The mind work of meditation moves us to reflection on where we are in the text.”³³ The key word is “reflection.” In meditation, we resist the urge to

32. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 22.

33. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 23.

rush into prayer immediately following the reading of Scripture. Rather, we take the time to reflect on what the text means and how God is speaking to us personally through it.

Magrassi emphasizes this “personalizing” goal of meditation: “God speaks not only to his people; he also addresses me personally. His Word takes on a special tone and resonance for me, a function of the special and unique plan he has for my life.”³⁴ As I have developed my own devotional rhythms, I have learned to intentionally engage in meditation immediately after a morning reading of Scripture, as I go about the normal business of the morning. As I empty the dishwasher or take out the garbage or shave, I repeat key phrases from that day’s reading in my mind, playing with the wording, correlating it with other biblical concepts, and imagining the ways it applies to my life. It is during these moments that I often sense God speaking to me in highly personal ways.

To summarize: spiritual intimacy comes through receiving and responding to the Word of God—in that order, since God spoke first. So far we’ve explored what is involved in receiving the Word: preparing the heart for an encounter with God, reading the text with the ultimate goal of spiritual formation, and meditating on the text to receive the Word in a highly personal way. In this way, we open ourselves fully to the presence and power of God. In the words of Ambrose, “Sacred Scripture is drunk and devoured when the life-sap of the eternal Word penetrates the veins of the spirit and the powers of the soul.”³⁵

34. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 7.

35. Ambrose, *Ps. 1*, cited in Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 33.

Responding to God's Word

As I have already emphasized, our part in spiritual formation needs to be a response to God's part. Currie explains: "The rhythms of authentic spirituality always begin with the downbeat of the word—God's own self-revelation—evoking the upbeat of prayer, monitored through reflection, inwardly in self-examination and outwardly in community discernment."³⁶ So, now that we have experienced God's voice in the "downbeat," it's time to give attention to the "upbeat": responding to what we've heard from him. This response involves two main elements: prayer and what I will call "living the Word."

Prayer

There is a clear consensus among wise contemplatives throughout church history: we should view our prayers as a response to God's prior speech. In his masterful book on prayer, Timothy Keller writes, "Christian prayer is fellowship with the personal God who befriends us through speech."³⁷ He adds, "In all cases God is the initiator— 'hearing' always precedes asking. God comes to us first or we would never reach out to him."³⁸ And, "Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him."³⁹

Stated more succinctly by Peterson, "Prayer is answering speech; it is not primarily 'address' but 'response.'"⁴⁰ Adopting this mindset alone can profoundly change the way we

36. Currie, "Shaped," 51.

37. Keller, *Prayer*, 52.

38. Keller, *Prayer*, 46.

39. Keller, *Prayer*, 48.

40. Peterson, *Angles*, loc. 450.

think about prayer. God thinks enough about us that he would address us personally! This knowledge should suffuse our prayers with gratitude and intimacy.

To go a step further, the actual content of our prayers should be shaped by the Word we have received from God. Thompson writes, “Let prayer emerge from your encounter with this text. How do you find yourself praying for your own needs, given what you have heard? How does this word move you to pray for others?”⁴¹ This is a significant question, because I can testify from my own experience that without the shaping influence of Scripture, my prayers tend to become repetitive, unimaginative, human-centered, and stale. As Magrassi explains, “Lacking nourishment, [prayer] runs on empty. There is only one remedy for this: to nourish prayer with the rich deposit left in us by the Word.”⁴²

To combat this, writes Keller, “...our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scripture. We should ‘plunge ourselves into the sea’ of God’s language, the Bible. We should listen, study, think, reflect, and ponder the Scriptures until there is an answering response in our hearts and minds.”⁴³

One method of accomplishing this is presented in Sam Ingrassia’s book, *Just Say the Word*. He explains the approach thus:

41. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 26.

42. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 114.

43. Keller, *Prayer*, 55.

So let's call our approach "Expository Praying." We can follow the Bible with our prayers. God's Word will be the guide to show us the topics, ideas, praises and requests. In doing so, we allow God to show us what to pray about. We "call out" God's Word in our prayers. The Bible gives us the tracks to follow, and in this way, we can be sure our prayers are on track.⁴⁴

He later adds, "...by following the Word of God and by letting the Bible literally be the text of our prayers, then the Bible will take care of keeping our prayers fresh."⁴⁵ In this simple model of devotional prayer, Ingrassia calls for essentially repeating and sometimes slightly re-wording the day's biblical text in our prayers. By taking this approach, we will find ourselves praying things—for ourselves and those we love—that we would never think to pray otherwise.

This is a tremendous improvement over prayers that are divorced from Scripture! However, as I will contend more fully in the next chapter, I also feel this method carries the danger of simply parroting the words of the Bible back to God without deeply understanding them. Mulholland suggests a strategy that begins to address this danger: "Another type of response is 'Praying the Word.' You develop a phrasing of the text of scripture or the message of the Word, expressed in a very brief prayer... Then, throughout the day, I would breathe this prayer to God as a constant offering of myself..."⁴⁶ Developing "a phrasing of the text of Scripture or the message of the Word" implies grappling with the text's meaning before turning it into a prayer, which I believe will give more "teeth" to the prayer. In his popular book, *Search the Scriptures*, Stibbs recommends something similar: "Use the passage as a basis for worship and praise. Pray over the lessons learnt. There will be some particular thought (or thoughts)

44. Sam Ingrassia, *Just Say the Word* (New Vantage, 2012), 11.

45. Ingrassia, *Just Say the Word*, 12.

46. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 158.

that is God's word to you for the day. Seek to discover it, and then in prayer relate it practically to your own life.⁴⁷

As I will flesh out in the next chapter, the Big Idea Devotions method incorporates the intent of these various approaches of turning the text into a prayer, while adding one additional benefit: by striving to verbalize the Big Idea, through identifying the subject and complement of the passage, the prayer more faithfully captures the central meaning of the Scripture.

Living the Word

When our devotional meetings with the Lord have been meaningful, the benefits should obviously last far beyond the brief moments we spend in the Word and prayer. This final part of responding to the Word encompasses everything involved in carrying God's word out of the devotional hour and into the day. Thompson recommends:

When you emerge from your contemplation, find a word, image, or phrase that carries the core message you have received. Take this with you into your daily activities and relationships. Let your reflection and prayer continue inwardly as new experiences deepen the word you hear in your spiritual reading.⁴⁸

Mulholland suggests something similar: writing on a card a brief reminder of what God spoke to you through the Word and carrying the card throughout the day as a reminder. He gets very close to the Big Idea method when he suggests, "...rather than reproducing the text of

47. Alan M. Stibbs, *Search the Scriptures: A 3-Year Daily Devotional Guide to the Whole Bible* (Westmont: IVP Connect, 2013), xiv.

48. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 27.

Scripture, you may want to use the focal message that God is speaking to you out of that text.”⁴⁹

Besides serving as a personal reminder to internalize and embrace God’s personal message to me for the day, this written reminder serves two additional purposes. First, it provides a clear, transferrable message that I am ready to share with others. Magrassi explains, “That Word [that I share with a brother or sister] contains a piece of my soul and has the irresistible tendency to spread which is proper to all experience. Its ability to affect the life of someone else is in proportion to how much it has affected mine.”⁵⁰ This has been so significant in my own experience! What a holy privilege to receive a Word from the Lord during my devotional time, pray it for myself and others, and then as I go about my day, to see God orchestrating encounters with others who need to hear that very Word. It is a joy to be in step with the Spirit as he ministers the Word to me and to others through me!

And finally, carrying this clear summary of God’s Word to me out of my devotional time provides a stimulus for personal obedience. Mulholland reminds us: “The basic way the Word nurtures our growth is through obedience—which I offer up to God so he can use it to shape me by grace.”⁵¹ As embarrassing as it may be to admit, I have a strong tendency to be like the man described in James 1, who looks at himself in the mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what he just saw. A simple, written reminder of the “nugget” of each day’s Scripture, which for me takes the form of a simple entry on a phone app, prevents this forgetfulness. And

49. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 157.

50. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 101.

51. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 118.

as I review the message several times throughout the day, I am hearing and re-hearing God's Word, which prompts and directs my obedience. By God's grace, Big Idea Devotions helps me to live out the ideal that James describes: "...whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do" (James 1:25).

Receiving and Responding to God's Word through *Lectio Divina*

Before closing this section, I should point out that one way to practice much of what I have been describing is *Lectio Divina*. Refined and popularized by the Benedictine monks in the sixth century but embraced far beyond the Catholic tradition in the years since, *Lectio* is an approach to receiving and responding to the Word that many have found helpful. *Lectio Divina* is Latin for "divine reading," or "sacred reading." As Currie and Currie explain, "It is not a study of the text, but rather an opening of one's deepest self to be encountered by the Spirit of Christ who speaks through the text to our individual hearts and lives."⁵² I do feel there are some drawbacks to completely omitting a study of the text (as I will explain shortly), but the time-tested value of *Lectio* is beyond question and needs to be acknowledged.

As Currie and Currie describe, *Lectio Divina* involves four steps:

-*Reading*: slowly and contemplatively listening for God's voice.

52. David A. Currie and Susan Currie, "Preaching as *Lectio Divina*: An Evangelical and Expository Approach," *Evangelical Homiletics Society* 1 (2004): 10-24.

-*Meditation*: listening carefully to words or images the Holy Spirit brings to our attention, seeking to receive the message God has for us.

-*Prayer*: responding to what God has revealed through the Scripture.

-*Contemplation*: resting contentedly in the presence of God, “doing nothing but letting ourselves love God, and knowing the fullness of his love.”⁵³

Personally, I have practiced *Lectio Divina* many times, both alone and in groups, and found it to be a consistently enriching experience. In fact, my weekly men’s Bible study uses a version of *Lectio* every time we meet, with wonderful results. But for all its benefits, in my opinion there is a drawback. At the risk of presumptuously critiquing a beloved, centuries-old practice, I believe *Lectio Divina* sometimes leads to fanciful “words from God” that are not supported by the Scripture from which they purportedly arise. By omitting the element of study entirely, we open ourselves to the danger of hearing something God never intended to say. I have found that Big Idea Devotions are one way to avoid this danger, while preserving the numerous benefits of *Lectio Divina*.

53. Currie & Currie, “Preaching.”

The Unexplored Value of the Big Idea in Personal Devotions

In this thesis-project, I am contending that there is a largely unexplored method of receiving and responding to the Word, leading to spiritual intimacy: using Big Idea principles in personal devotions. Since the concept of Big Idea devotions per se is a novel idea (as far as I know!), it is not explicitly addressed in the literature and therefore won't be detailed in this literature review chapter. Instead, in this section of Chapter 3, I will set the stage for Big Idea Devotions by drawing from relevant literature to demonstrate three things: (1) The widely accepted idea of the Big Idea in communication, (2) The proven value of the Big Idea in preaching, and (3) The lesser-known value of the Big Idea in worship.

The Widely-accepted Value of the Big Idea in Communication

There is a general consensus among specialists that communication is most effective when a single, clear idea—often called a “thesis”—is conveyed from sender to listener. As Wilhoit and Ryken point out in their book *Effective Bible Teaching*, most students are exposed to this principle during their high school years as they learn to write essays. For example, according to one student writing handbook, the thesis is what a writer intends to assert about the subject, and it should be stated as a complete sentence or proposition.⁵⁴ They cite another writing handbook which reminds us: “Most essays are focused on and controlled by a single main idea that the writer wants to communicate to readers—a central theme to which all the general statements and specific information of the essay relate.”⁵⁵

54. Sheridan Baker, *The Practical Stylist*, 6th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 19-24, cited in James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2012), 71.

55. H. Ramsey Fowler, *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), 24, cited in James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2012), 71-72.

Wilhoit and Ryken point us to another writing manual that warns of the results when writing lacks such singular clarity:

Without a thesis a paper inhabits a certain territory, but is likely to drift aimlessly like a purposeless vagrant. However interesting or well-written such a paper may be, a reader cannot help but wonder: What's the point? How does all of this connect? What am I supposed to come away with? A sharply focused thesis gives a paper direction, gives it a goal to aim for.⁵⁶

I must mention a personal experience in my own journey of learning to write. Early in life I was gifted in the use of language, and writing came quite naturally. This God-given ability enabled me to breeze through English classes and receive high marks on my writing assignments all the way through 11th grade. But in 12th grade I took AP English with the dreaded Mrs. Heeney. Early in the school year I turned in an essay that I had written hastily (as always), peppered with impressive vocabulary words and what I felt were sophisticated sentences. Mrs. Heeney returned it to me with a scandalously low grade, and while I don't remember the exact language she used, she essentially wrote, "What's your point?" After I had recovered from the assault on my ego, that moment marked a turning point for me. No longer would I gauge communication effectiveness by eloquent language; I needed to have a clear point, and to support that point throughout the essay. To this day I am indebted to Mrs. Heeney, and every sermon I preach is clearer because of her loving rebuke!

The value of a single, clear idea is not limited to written communication. In recent years, one well-known format of public speaking is TED Talks—short speeches on a wide variety of subjects given live at conferences, many of which go on to enjoy viral popularity online. Chris

56. Bruce Bawer, *The Contemporary Stylist* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 13, cited in James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2012), 72.

Anderson, the curator of TED, asserts that “Our number one task as a speaker is to transfer into your listeners' minds an extraordinary gift—a strange and beautiful object that we call an idea.”⁵⁷ He goes on to make this audacious claim about ideas: “If communicated properly, they're capable of changing, forever, how someone thinks about the world, and shaping their actions both now and well into the future. Ideas are the most powerful force shaping human culture.”⁵⁸

So, how do we go about communicating with such powerful effectiveness? Anderson offers four guidelines, with the first guideline clearly paramount: limit your talk to just one major idea. His explanation of this guideline is worth quoting in full:

Ideas are complex things; you need to slash back your content so that you can focus on the single idea you're most passionate about, and give yourself a chance to explain that one thing properly. You have to give context, share examples, make it vivid. So pick one idea, and make it the through-line running through your entire talk, so that everything you say links back to it in some way.⁵⁹

This is highly relevant to a Big Idea approach to Scripture, because pericopes of Scripture are also laden with complexity. If we're not careful, our well-meaning treatment of a passage—whether in preaching or in our own devotions—will result in confusion and lack of impact. We would be wise to follow the wisdom of TED Talks and, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and basic Big Idea principles—pick one clear idea that faithfully reflects the thrust of the passage. The recipients of our message will thank us.

57 Chris Anderson, “TED’s Secret to Great Public Speaking,” online video, April 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FOcpMAww28>

58 Anderson, “TED’s Secret.”

59 Anderson, “TED’s Secret.”

In 2007, brothers Chip and Dan Heath wrote a best-selling book called *Made to Stick*. In it, the authors draw from examples in advertising, public service, and other walks of life to explain what kind of communication is “sticky;” that is, it sticks with the recipient and has the intended effect (the term “sticky” was first popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *Tipping Point*⁶⁰). The Heath’s recommendations are represented by the acronym “SUCCEsS,” which stands for *Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional, and Stories*. While each of these concepts carries valuable lessons for communication of any kind, for our purposes I will focus on the first one: “sticky” communication is, first and foremost, *simple*.

The Heaths remind us that good defense lawyers follow the simplicity principle: “If you argue ten points, even if each is a good point, when they get back to the jury room they won’t remember any.”⁶¹ Similarly, journalists need to be wary of communicating too many ideas:

The longer you work on a story, the more you can find yourself losing direction. No detail is too small. You just don’t know what your story is anymore. This problem of losing direction, of missing the central story, is so common that journalists have given it its own name: Burying the lead. “Burying the lead” occurs when the journalist lets the most important element of the story slip too far down in the story structure.⁶²

I had to laugh when reading this because of the number of times I’ve heard (and preached!) sermons whose main idea got lost in a cascade of other thoughts that the preacher found interesting, but which served only to confuse and distract the listener from what was

60. Malcolm Gladwell, *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2006).

61. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), 16.

62. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 32.

most important. The same could be said for many encounters I've had with Scripture during personal devotions: lots of ideas, but none that I could actually remember by lunchtime.

So how do we identify the simple message we are looking for? According to the Heaths, we must discern the “core” of the idea⁶³, which is *not* the same as “dumbing down” the idea. “It’s about elegance and prioritization, not dumbing down.”⁶⁴ And how do we actually arrive at that elegant, core message? “To get to the core, we’ve got to weed out superfluous and tangential elements. But that’s the easy part. The hard part is weeding out ideas that may be really important but just aren’t the most important idea.”⁶⁵ I appreciated the quote from French aviator and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, explaining elegance in engineering: “A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add , but when there is nothing left to take away.”⁶⁶ The Heaths conclude: “A designer of simple ideas should aspire to the same goal: knowing how much can be wrung out of an idea before it begins to lose its essence.”⁶⁷

And finally, the Heaths remind us why this is all so important as we craft messages: “It’s a bandwidth issue: The more we reduce the amount of information in an idea, the stickier it will be.”⁶⁸ In other words, if we truly have our listeners in mind as we communicate, desiring above all that they grasp and retain the message we’re communicating, we will recognize the human

63. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 30.

64. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 30.

65. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 28.

66. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 28.

67. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 28.

68. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 46.

mind's preference for simplicity and communicate accordingly. We will never sacrifice the integrity of the message for the sake of simplicity, but we will work hard to faithfully reflect the core of our idea in the simplest form possible.

To summarize, the value of a clear, simple Big Idea is broadly recognized to be the most effective way to communicate a message. This has been demonstrated in writing essays, giving speeches, and conveying ideas that “stick” in a wide variety of contexts. This has clear application to the practice of Big Idea devotions, where we emerge from our devotional time with a single, clear, “sticky” idea, faithfully reflecting that day's Scripture. This is the thought we carry with us throughout the day: guiding our prayers, prompting our obedience, and providing a shareable nugget we can pass on to others.

The Proven Value of the Big Idea in Preaching

Given the demonstrated effectiveness of the Big Idea in all these modes of communication, it's not surprising that the Big Idea also has great value for preaching. In the introductory chapter I gave an overview of the value and method of Big Idea Preaching, popularized most notably by Haddon Robinson and taught for decades at institutions such as Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Dallas Theological Seminary. Rather than repeating that overview here, I will emphasize a few points that are especially relevant to Big Idea Devotions.

Big Idea Preaching is a homiletical approach in which the main idea of the biblical text becomes the main idea of the sermon, and the sermon communicates that main idea in a simple, clear, memorable way. As a result, the listeners walk away from the sermon with a clear word from God: a single, compelling thought ringing in their ears (and in their hearts).

The Big Idea of a sermon, according to Don Sunujkian, is

...the central truth the author is trying to get across. It's the truth you want the listeners to take home and remember even if they forget everything else. Weeks later they may not remember what passage it came from, but hopefully the wording of this sentence will still come to mind and work its godliness in them.⁶⁹

This is precisely the purpose of Big Idea Devotions. But rather than striving to implant a biblically-faithful truth in the hearts of our listeners, it is our *own* hearts on which we are focused. In the simplest terms, we take the energy and hopes that drive a great sermon, and direct all of that energy into preaching to ourselves!

The preacher arrives at the Big idea by asking the question, "What is the largest question the biblical author is addressing with this flow of thought, and what answer is he giving to that question?"⁷⁰ This process entails identifying the "subject" (what is the passage talking about?) and the "complement" (what is the passage saying about what it's talking about?).⁷¹ In my experience, the process of discerning the subject is the most difficult and important challenge. Once the subject is discerned, the complement tends to follow fairly easily.

The subject is always phrased in the form of a question, and in his seminal book *Biblical Preaching*, Robinson suggests we start with the six well-known interrogatives: *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. He uses the example of James 1:5-8, where a good subject

69. Donald Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007), 66.

70. Sunujkian, *Invitation*, 73.

71. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), loc 489-495, Kindle.

question would be, “How can people obtain wisdom in the midst of trials?” That is the question the passage is addressing. It is the subject under consideration. And the complement, which completes the subject and turns it into a coherent idea, could be: “Ask God for it in faith.” So the complete exegetical Big Idea is, “People can obtain wisdom in trials by asking God for it in faith.”⁷²

As discussed in the opening chapter, there is a distinction between the exegetical Big Idea, which is bound to the world of the biblical text, and the homiletical Big Idea, which has been contextualized to apply directly to modern listeners. Failing to take the step from exegetical to homiletic Big Idea will deprive a sermon of its life-changing impact. Robinson appeals to the wisdom of A.W. Tozer:

There is scarcely anything so dull and meaningless as Bible doctrine taught for its own sake. Truth divorced from life is not truth in its Biblical sense, but something else and something less. . . . No man is better for knowing that God in the beginning created the heaven and the earth. The devil knows that, and so did Ahab and Judas Iscariot. No man is better for knowing that God so loved the world of men that He gave His only begotten Son to die for their redemption. In hell there are millions who know that. Theological truth is useless until it is obeyed. The purpose behind all doctrine is to secure moral action.⁷³

The implication for Big Idea Preaching is clear: in the preparation of a message, the preacher has to determine the *purpose* for a sermon. How is this accomplished? By subjecting the exegetical idea to three “developmental questions”: *What does it mean? Is it true? What difference does it make?* In other words, *we explain it, we prove it, and we apply it.*⁷⁴ It is the

72. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, loc 850-871.

73. A. W. Tozer, *Of God and Men* (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, 1960), 26–27, quoted in Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, loc 1460.

74. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, chapter 4.

third developmental question, *What difference does it make?*, which is the ultimate goal of a sermon. Similarly, this is the ultimate goal of personal devotions: what does the truth of this Scripture mean for my life when I close my Bible and walk out into the world?

In order to answer the “so what” question, the preacher must identify the purpose of the passage. In other words, what moral action did the Spirit-inspired author hope to elicit in the original recipients?⁷⁵ Then, by recognizing what modern listeners have in common with the original recipients, we aim that purpose at our listeners (or in the case of devotions, at ourselves). In the example given above, from James 1:5-8, there is an easy jump from the world of the text to the world of today. Just like James’ original readers, we desperately need divine wisdom when we experience trials. We are just like them! Therefore, the exegetical idea, “People can obtain wisdom in trials by asking God for it in faith,” can easily become the homiletical idea, “When you need wisdom in trials, ask God for it in faith.”

As a preacher who is convinced of the effectiveness of Big Idea preaching for the spiritual health of my congregation, it follows logically that this same process—identifying the original meaning and purpose of a biblical text and applying it to the lives of my listeners in a clear, memorable way—can and should be utilized when preaching to myself. But before I explain how I tested my Big Idea Devotional hypothesis in chapter four, I want to mention one way in which Big Idea principles have been applied beyond the world of preaching.

75. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, loc 1469.

The Lesser-known Value of the Big Idea in Worship

As mentioned in the opening chapter, the Big Idea concept has been taken beyond preaching and applied to the overall design of worship services, most notably by David Currie in *The Big Idea of Biblical Worship*. As Currie describes it, “The ‘Big Idea’ of the book is that biblical worship should flow out of the central idea of a Scripture passage in a way similar to how biblical preaching does.”⁷⁶ In order to accomplish this, Currie proposes starting with the same initial steps we use in Big Idea preaching: (1) Selecting the passage, (2) Studying the passage, (3) Discovering the Exegetical Idea, and (4) Analyzing the Exegetical Idea. At the fifth step, however, “...the process diverges more explicitly: from ‘Formulating the Homiletical Idea’ to ‘Formulating the Liturgical Ideas’—answering distinctive developmental questions about how we should respond in worship to what God has revealed in his word.”⁷⁷ Note that, just as in Big Idea Preaching, the exegetical process is followed by a set of developmental questions. But here the goal is slightly different: *determining how we should respond to the Word in worship*.

Being careful to remain rooted in the teaching of the day’s main text, the five Liturgical Developmental Questions are as follows:

1. What should we praise God for? (Rejoice)
2. What should we confess to God? (Repent)
3. What should we ask God for? (Request)
4. What should we lift up to God? (Sacrifice)
5. What should we live out for God? (Service)⁷⁸

By thoughtfully answering these developmental questions, worship leaders are equipped to design elements in a gathered worship gathering—such as songs, responsive

76. David A. Currie, *The Big Idea of Biblical Worship: The Development and Leadership of Expository Services* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2021), loc 141, Kindle.

readings, offering prayers, confession, petitions, and calls to action—that flow logically from the teaching of the day’s Scripture, and that help the worshipers to respond to God’s voice with all of their being.

An example that Currie gives is Psalm 117, an extremely brief Psalm:

¹ Praise the LORD, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
² For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
Praise the LORD.

If this Psalm were the main text for a worship service, Currie suggests possible answers to the liturgical questions as follows (in brief summary):

1. *What should we praise God for?* His great love and faithfulness. This praise could be expressed through various worship songs that celebrate the love and faithfulness of God. We could also focus on the “all you nations” element of verse 1 by singing worship in various languages.
2. *What should we confess to God?* We might lead our people to repent of the fact that our love is often weak in comparison to God’s great love, or that we have racist or self-absorbed tendencies that keep us from gospel interaction with the nations.
3. *What should we ask God for?* The worship service could include prayers for the nations, for the church’s supported missionaries, or for a greater awareness of God’s great love for us.

77. Currie, *Biblical Worship*, loc 673-681.

78. Currie, *Biblical Worship*, loc 1202.

4. *What should we lift up to God?* Perhaps a special missionary offering, or a special song presented as a sacrifice of praise in gratitude for God's faithful love.
5. *What should we live out for God?* The service could end with a challenge to live a "hallelujah lifestyle," or we could suggest inviting an international student for dinner.⁷⁹

Does this kind of approach guarantee a spiritually transformative worship service? Of course not. Currie's explanation is helpful and vivid:

Human effort can never control the Holy Spirit. In the same way, simply following the process outlined in this book to create the best-designed worship service, carried out by gifted and experienced worship leaders in the context of a congregation bursting at the seams does not somehow compel the Spirit to fill a service. When the wind of the Spirit does blow, having all these things in place will most likely lead to more powerfully transformative experiences of God in worship...⁸⁰

There is so much to glean here in our development of Big Idea Devotions. We could even say that in a sense, Big Idea Devotions are a form of Big Idea Worship, because personal devotions are essentially private worship. For that reason, all five of Currie's developmental questions could prove helpful in the development of the Big Idea Devotions prayer. While the method that I practice normally leans toward the fifth of Currie's questions ("What should I live out for God?"), certain passages lend themselves more naturally to one of the other four questions and should be considered.

79. Currie, *Biblical Worship*, loc 1206-1354.

80. Currie, *Biblical Worship*, loc 2212.

Some Cautions in Using a Big Idea Approach to Devotions

Finally, I will briefly mention some dangers inherent in the practice of Big Idea Devotions. All of these flow from the aforementioned principles gleaned from the relevant literature.

Caution #1: Failing to move from informational to formational reading

As was discussed earlier, there is devotional value in seeking to understand the information being communicated in a text of Scripture. In fact, one of the guiding principles of Big Idea Devotions is that properly understanding the text's message is crucial, and often neglected. The danger is to view the acquisition of that informational knowledge as an end in itself. Magrassi writes: "This does not prevent investigation and research on our part. If human language is the means, we will certainly need to analyze it with the help of philology. But our internal attitude is not that of philologist analyzing Homer or Livy. The content of this language is a divine Word which is mystery."⁸¹

Later, Magrassi explains the role of informational knowledge in *lectio divina*: "...we do not mean to exclude the appropriate role of study, and normally, the need for it. All we are saying is that its role with regard to *lectio divina* is introductory. It prepares us for the vital assimilation that can take place only in prayer."⁸² The warning is clear: be careful of getting "stuck" in the informational mode, as if coming up with a catchy devotional Big Idea is the

81. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 62

82. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 72.

ultimate goal! We must always view the entire process as a way of raising our sails to catch the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Caution #2: Mistaking pragmatic principles for genuine spiritual intimacy

This is similar to the first caution, but more specific. Big Idea Devotions provide us with a daily Word from God, rooted in the text of Scripture. This nugget of truth is often very pragmatic and “livable,” much like a Proverb. But understanding that principle is not the end game; it is a pathway to experience and obey God more fully. Mulholland writes: “...instead of coming to what we read to find a solution for something else in our life, we come to be open to that mystery we call *God*.”⁸³

Mulholland also warns: “The Pharisees’ basic problem was not simply a functional approach applied to their relationship with God but the idea that “doing” somehow guaranteed the quality of “being” that God expected.”⁸⁴ Even if we composed brilliantly biblical and memorable devotional Big Ideas, shared them with ten people each day, and obeyed them perfectly, this would not necessarily make us spiritually mature, Christ-like people. As with any devotional method, Big Idea Devotions can lead to Pharisaism if approached with wrong motives. In the wise words of Magrassi, “The Word of God is too great, and we are too small to approach it with presumption or intellectual pride. Our forehead must be prostrate in the dust.”⁸⁵

83. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 59.

84. Mulholland, *Shaped*, 98.

85. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 60.

Caution #3: Wearing our “Preacher” Hat instead of our “Disciple” Hat

Since this thesis-project is Big Idea Devotions *for Preachers*, and since I am proposing the application of sermon-preparation technique to personal devotions, this is a highly relevant warning. When our calling is to preach, it is sometimes difficult to look at any text of Scripture without automatically imagining how we might turn it into a sermon. Currie and Currie express this caution well:

If we seek to speak for God, we must let God have the first word. That means silencing the inner voice that shouts "That'll preach!" as we begin reflecting on a passage so that we can hear the Spirit's still, small voice echoing from the Word. Classic spiritual disciplines related to *lectio* such as silence, reading a passage slowly and repeatedly, reading a passage aloud, and journaling help preachers grow in attending to the Word of God in a way that primarily shapes the soul, not the sermon.⁸⁶

For me, this requires a high level of honest self-knowledge and vulnerability. Rooted in my secure status as a beloved child of God, I need to allow God, through his Word, to have full access to my heart. Preaching is what I *do*; my devotions are all about who I *am* and who God is making me to be. The distinction is critical.

Caution #4: Excluding the Holy Spirit

The fourth and final caution is to carry out the devotional process in our own strength, without acknowledging and depending on the illuminating and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. R.C. Sproul writes, “...illumination is when the Holy Spirit helps us understand a given text as it actually is. It is His work as the perfect exegete, helping us poor exegetes try to stay out of trouble. Such is certainly not as glamorous and exciting as the giving of new

86. Currie & Currie, “Preaching.”

revelation. It is, however, where the power is.”⁸⁷ Although the devotional task is not synonymous with scholarly exegesis, proper understanding of the holy Word is not possible without the aid of the Holy Spirit. It’s good for us to remember that.

As Magrassi reminds us, “Jerome...wrote that the Bible must be read and interpreted “in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written.”⁸⁸ Throughout my reading I found this quote attributed to numerous other people, including Wesley, Pope Paul VI and others. Regardless of who said it first, we’d be wise to bear in mind that through Christ, we have access to the same Spirit who inspired the words of Scripture. What a privilege! Magrassi aptly reminds us of the limits of any method, including Big Idea Devotions: “No technique gives access to a vital experience of the Word. The crucial factor is the light of the Spirit, a free gift that comes from him, its source.”⁸⁹

So, as we implement Big Idea Devotions, let’s do so with humility, reverence, vulnerability, and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit. In this we will be raising our sails to receive the wind of the Spirit and the presence of God himself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature confirms that intimacy with God is a common struggle for pastors—so common that many pastors attempt to normalize it. But in reality, the lack of pastoral spiritual intimacy leads to numerous negative outcomes, including emotional disorders, addiction, and burnout. To combat this, the collective wisdom of the church teaches

87. RC Sproul, “Jesus Changes Everything” Blog, 9/16/21.

88. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 29.

89. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 58.

us that pastors can enjoy spiritual intimacy through the Word of God—receiving the Word through heart preparation, reading and meditation, and responding to the Word through prayer and living it out. One time-tested way to receive and respond to the Word is *lectio divina*, or divine reading.

When considering how to best relate to God’s Word, we should consider the Big Idea approach: communicating a single, clear message in a simple, memorable way. The Big Idea is a proven way to effectively communicate a message in various contexts including essays, speeches, and marketing. In the Christian world, Big Idea preaching is a widely accepted method of presenting sermons, and it has also been incorporated into the design of entire worship services. For all these reasons, it makes sense to consider applying Big Idea principles to the practice of personal devotions, which is the purpose of this thesis-project.

If practiced with humility, vulnerability, and dependence on the Holy Spirit, Big Idea Devotions can be an effective way to receive and respond to the Word of God, leading to greater spiritual intimacy in the life of a pastor. In the following chapter, I detail how I tested the approach to devotions with a group of Big Idea preachers, and the results of the experiment.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path.
(Psalm 119:105)

Introduction

Given the common pastoral struggle for spiritual intimacy and the critical importance of that intimacy for the effectiveness and longevity of their ministries, I have been eager to test the hypothesis of this study. The benefit of Big Idea Devotions has been undeniable in my own life and ministry, and I was anxious to see if my fellow ministers would experience similar benefits. As mentioned previously, my personality is relatively organized, disciplined, and analytical; therefore, I was curious to see if this approach to personal devotions, which is more studious and content-based than what many are accustomed to, would resonate with others as it has with me. Would they reject it as overly academic and tedious, or embrace it as a valuable enhancement to their devotional lives?

If, as a result of my research, I learned that I was unique in my appreciation of Big Idea Devotions, I was ready to accept that reality—and I would have gone on happily using this approach in my personal walk with God. But I suspected and hoped that God had led me to this devotional method at this point in my life in order to bless other pastors with a valuable tool. And I was grateful for the rigor of Gordon-Conwell's Doctor of Ministry program, which provided a mechanism to test my hypothesis in a legitimate way. It was time for the research to begin!

Project Methodology

As the project title suggests, I tested my hypothesis with a group of people engaged in some aspect of pastoral ministry. More specifically, I worked with people who already had some degree of familiarity with Big Idea preaching, and whom I believed were either favorable or neutral toward Big Idea preaching (I excluded a few pastors whom I have heard explicitly disparaging Big Idea preaching). Since all my subjects had some knowledge of Big Idea preaching, I did not need to “start from scratch” by teaching Big Idea concepts from the ground up.

I began with an opening questionnaire, assessing the subjects’ familiarity with Big Idea preaching and their satisfaction with their current devotional lives. Next, we met as a group (via Zoom) in late October 2022 for a training session in which I conducted a quick review of Big Idea preaching and then provided instruction in the method of Big Idea Devotions. Then the subjects were given approximately three weeks to put Big Idea Devotions into practice, with all subjects focusing on the same passages of Scripture. At the conclusion of this three-week period, subjects completed a closing questionnaire, assessing the effectiveness of Big Idea Devotions. In addition, I offered an optional focus group (via Zoom) in late November 2022 to gather more qualitative data from the subjects.

Procedures and Materials

After securing the commitment of the subjects to participate, I administered an initial questionnaire, via Google Forms. This survey posed 15 questions, gathering participants’

demographic information (age, education level, and current ministry role); attitudes toward Big Idea preaching, and current level of satisfaction with their devotional lives. It was not necessary to obtain informed consent at this point, since completion of the survey indicated willingness to voluntarily participate in the project.

Next, I gathered the cohort via Zoom for a training session. Of the 24 total subjects, nine (37.5%) participated in the live training session (despite my efforts to choose a time that fit the schedules of the most possible people, which is testimony to the overbooked nature of pastors' schedules!). The training session lasted just under one hour, and participation was lively and thoughtful. The 15 subjects (62.5%) who were unable to participate in the live training session were sent a video of the training session the following day, and they watched the session on their own time. All subjects were provided with detailed notes of the training, which were essentially a manuscript of the training contents. (Training session notes can be found in Appendix A).

Following the training session, subjects were given approximately three weeks to put Big Idea Devotions into practice. They were assigned the book of James, which was divided into brief passages. I asked subjects to commit to practicing Big Idea Devotions at least ten times over the course of the three weeks. Prior to the training, each student had been provided with a new, hardcover journal filled with blank pages, in order to record their devotional notes.

At the conclusion of the three-week period, I administered a closing questionnaire, via Google forms. This survey posed 17 questions, gathering subjects' assessment of the training, experience in practicing Big Idea Devotions (how many times and how successful in implementing the method), and level of satisfaction with their devotional lives while using the

method (many of these questions mirrored those in the opening questionnaire, to measure progress). The closing questionnaire concluded with a question about the likelihood that subjects would implement Big Idea devotional methods in the future, and an open-ended question inviting general comments.

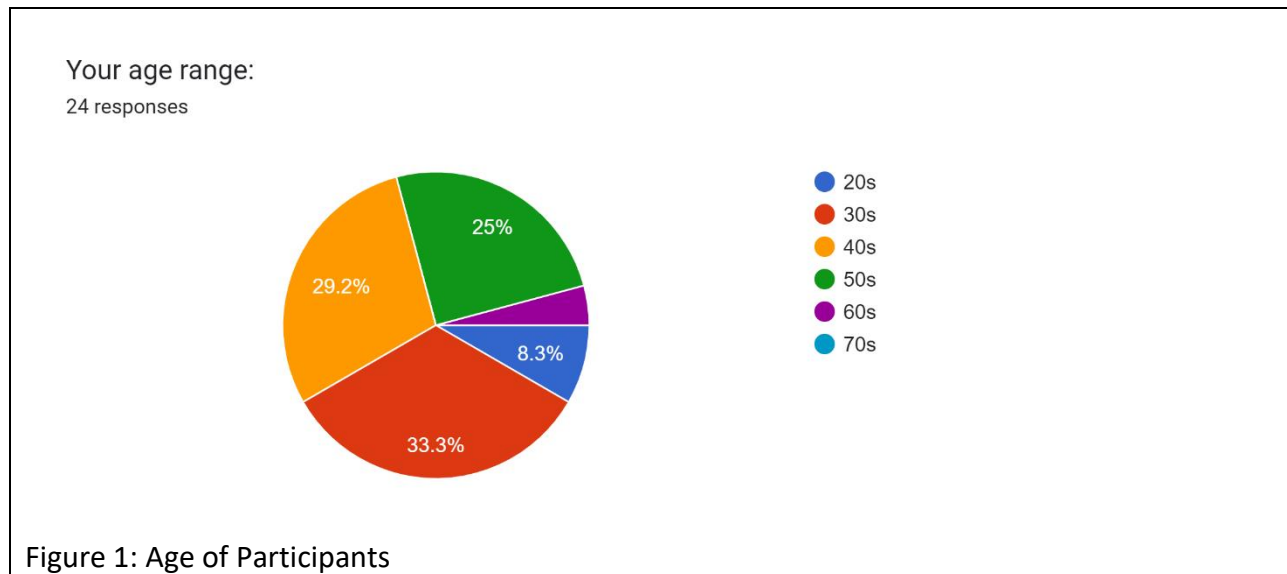
Finally, subjects were offered the opportunity to participate in an optional focus group via Zoom. Six participants (25%) participated in the focus group, where we had a substantial conversation debriefing subjects' experience, insights, and suggestions regarding Big Idea Devotions. (Focus group questions can be found in Appendix B). Following the focus group, subjects who participated signed an informed consent form via email, indicating with their signature that they understood that the informed consent applied retroactively to their participation in the focus group, and that they were free to withdraw their contributions at any time. (Informed consent forms can be found in Appendix C).

Research Participants

To recruit subjects, I sent email invitations to several groups of people: my own personal network of pastors in New Jersey and beyond, fellow students in my DMin cohort, the members of a Pastors' Book Club led by Dr. Jeffrey Arthurs from Gordon-Conwell, and members of a GCTS DMin cohort taught by Dr. Arthurs. As mentioned earlier, I intentionally did not invite several colleagues who in the past have indicated their unfavorable attitude toward Big Idea preaching, as their participation in this study would have been counterproductive (and they likely would have turned down my invitation anyway!). I "incentivized" participants by offering a devotional journal, to be provided at the outset, and a Starbucks gift card, to be provided upon completion

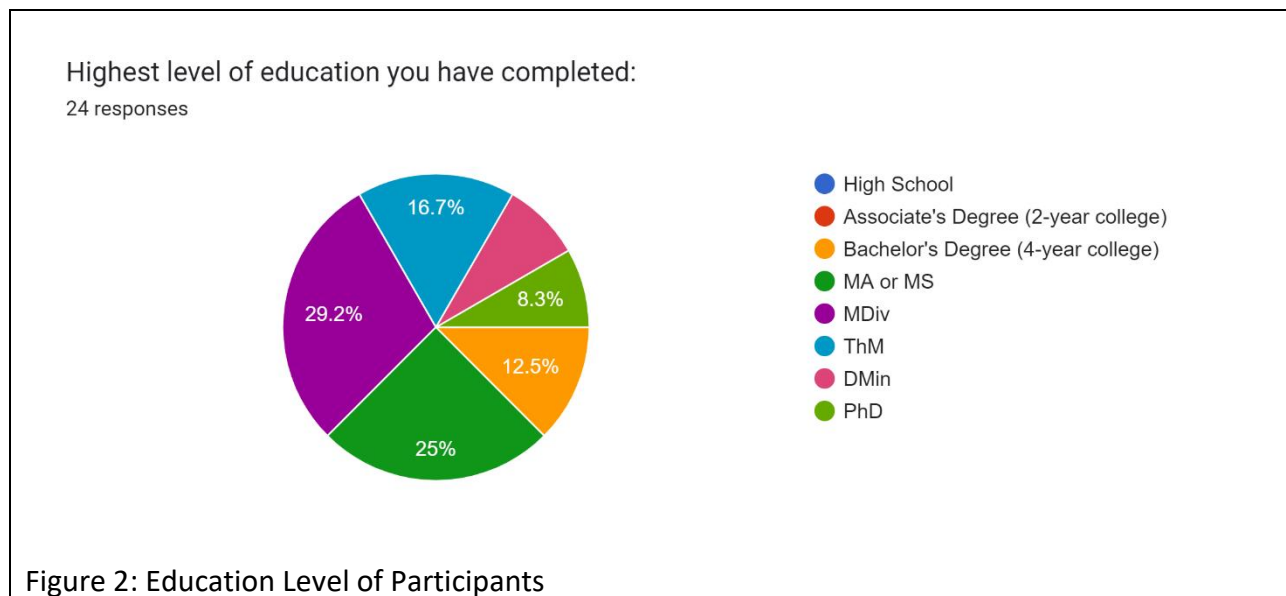
of the study. I was aware that recruiting subjects is often one of the more difficult aspects of a thesis-project, so I was grateful that around 27 people agreed to participate, with 24 people remaining involved through the conclusion of the project.

Age of Participants



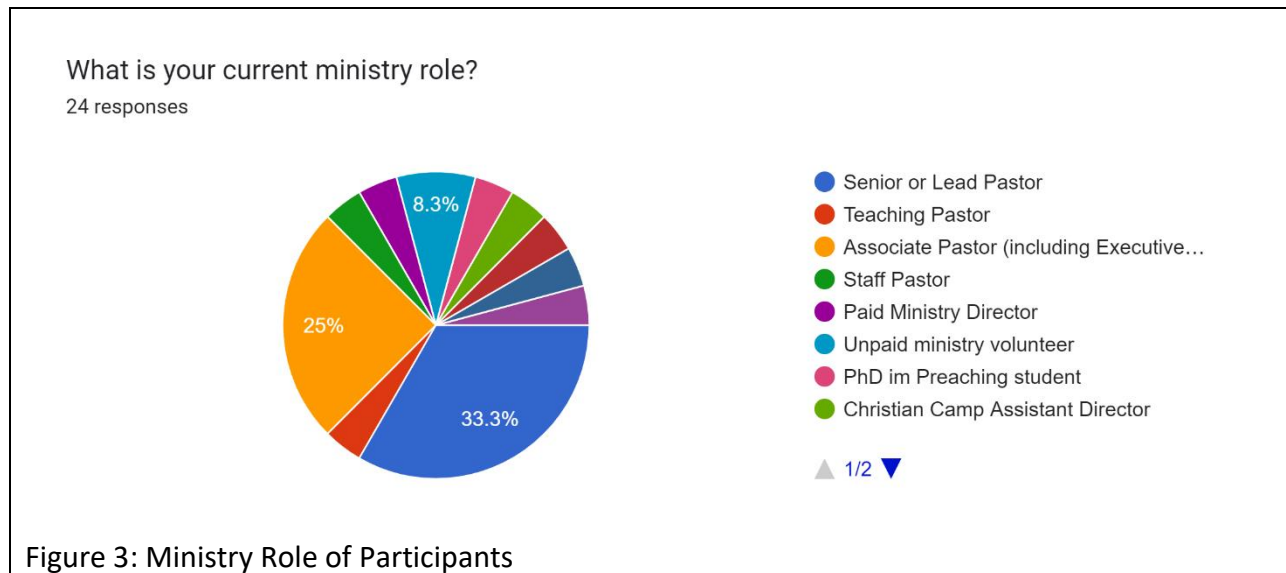
Subjects ranged in age from 20s to 60s, with 88% in their 30s, 40s and 50s. (See chart for complete age breakdown). It also should be noted that there were 23 men and one woman, which reflects the complementarian position held by many of the churches represented, including my own church and most of my personal ministry network. I did not have a definite purpose for collecting this data, but speculated that it may be useful in considering future applications of this devotional method.

Education Level of Participants



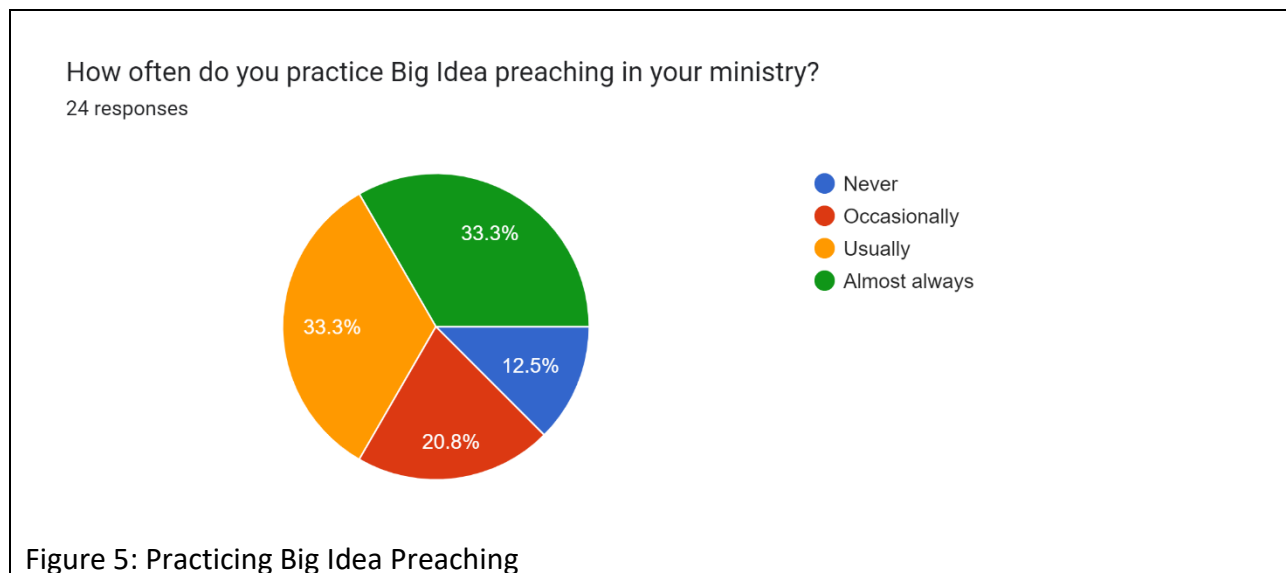
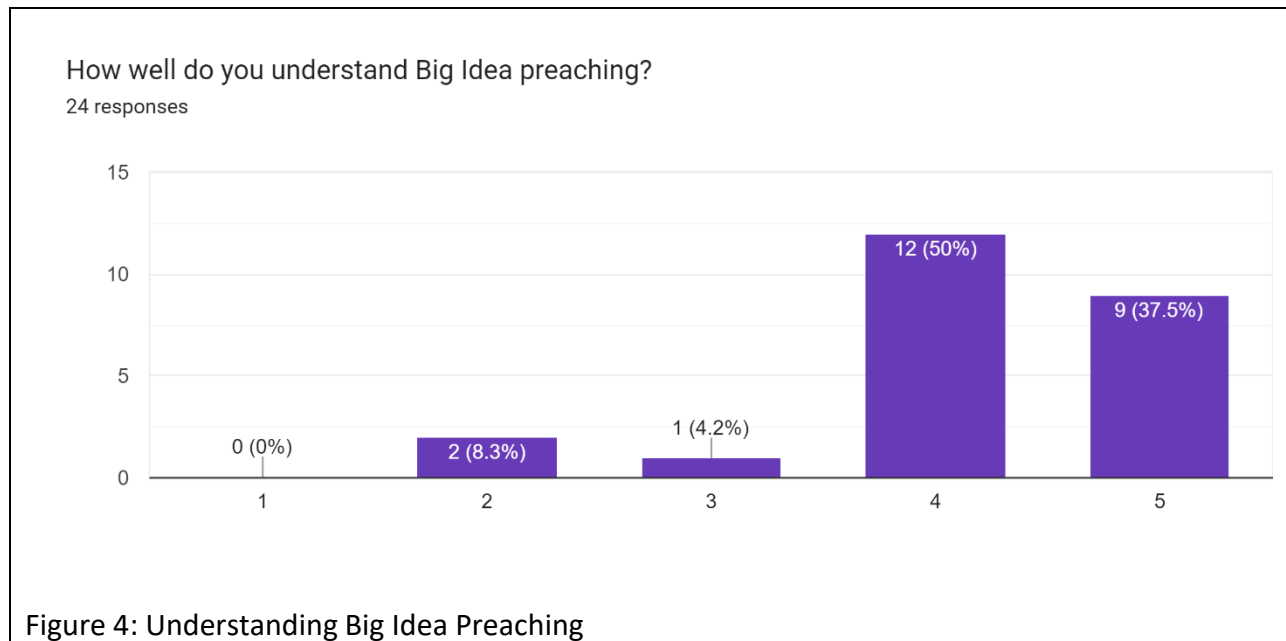
This was a highly educated group of subjects, with 87.5% holding a master's degree or higher. The remaining 12.5% held bachelor's degrees. This is significant to note as I consider future applications of Big Idea Devotions with people who aren't as highly educated. Additionally, 41.7% of subjects were enrolled in theological education at the time of the study, and another 29.1% had been enrolled in theological education within the past ten years.

Ministry Role of Participants



Regarding ministry role, 33% of subjects serve as senior or lead pastors, 25% associate pastors, and the remainder hold a variety of ministry roles in churches, schools, and other ministries. In the future, I would be interested in testing the effectiveness of Big Idea Devotions with people who are not engaged in full-time ministry.

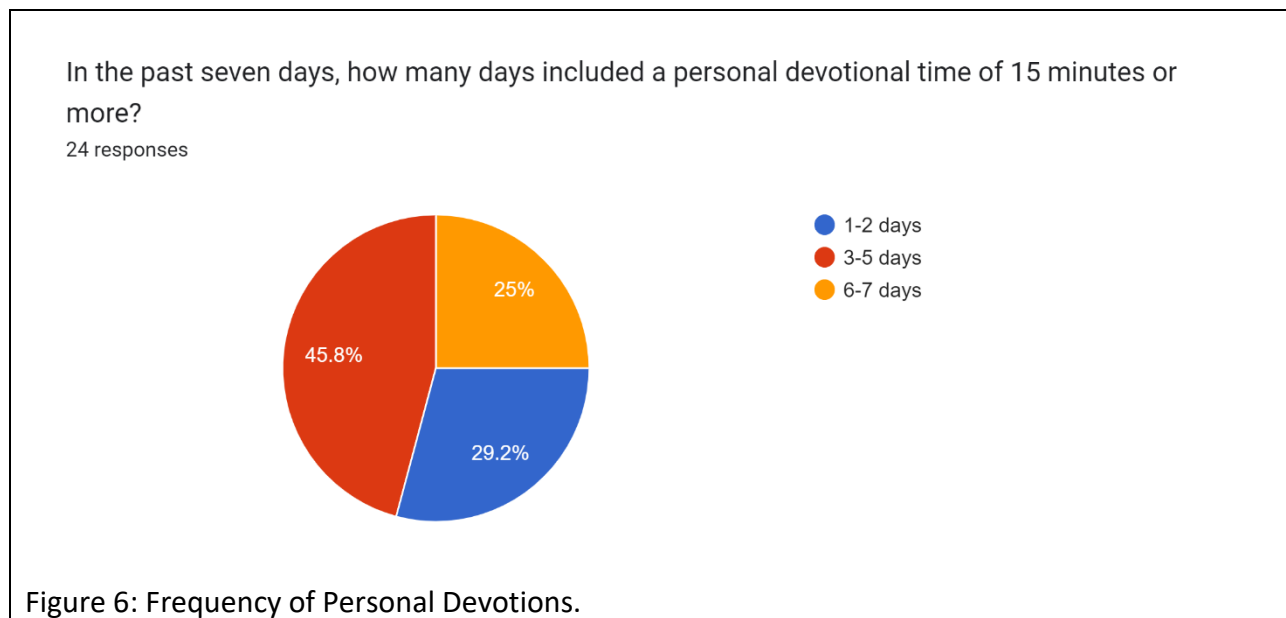
Understanding and Practice of Big Idea Preaching



In the initial questionnaire, on a scale from 1-5, with “1” meaning “not at all” and “5” meaning “very well,” 87.5% of subjects indicated that they understand Big Idea preaching at a “4” or “5” level. And one-third of subjects indicated that they practice Big Idea preaching “almost always” in their ministries, while another one-third practice it “usually,” and another

21% practice it “occasionally.” So my goal of working with people who are already familiar with Big Idea concepts was achieved, as 87.5% of participants report having a solid understanding of this preaching method and using it least occasionally.

Frequency of Personal Devotions

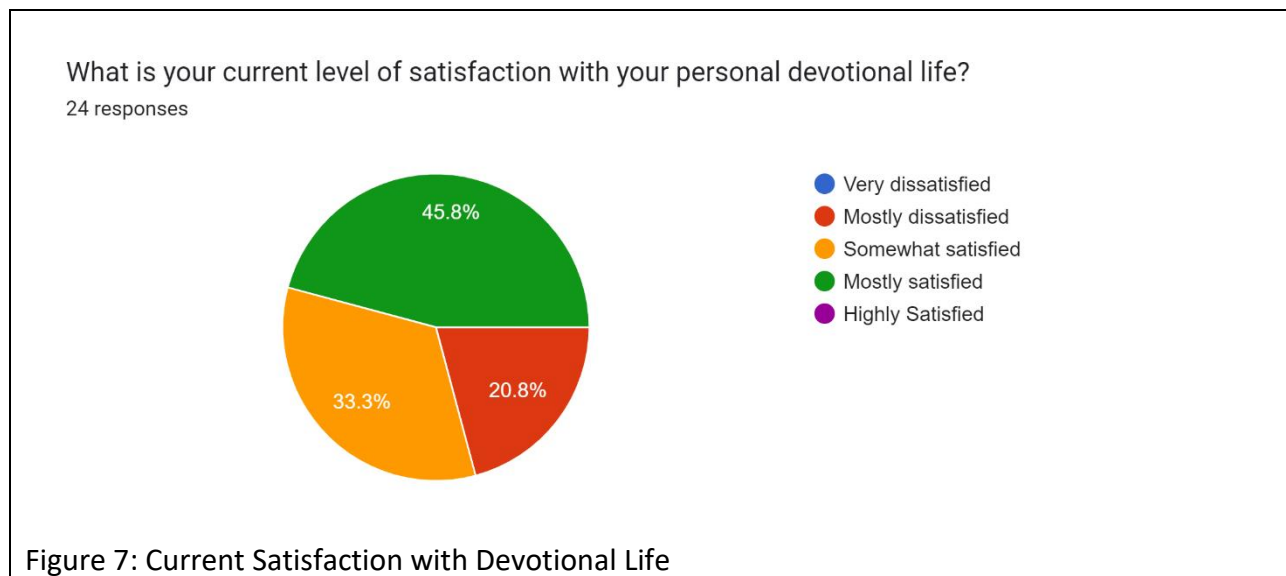


In the initial questionnaire, subjects were asked how frequently they engaged in personal devotions over the previous week. The most common answer was “3-5 days,” representing 45.8% of participants. The remaining participants were divided fairly equally between “6-7 days” (25%) and “1-2 days” (29.2%). It should be borne in mind that this question (as well as others) may be subject to response bias, with respondents tempted to exaggerate their typical devotional frequency.

Baseline Measurements

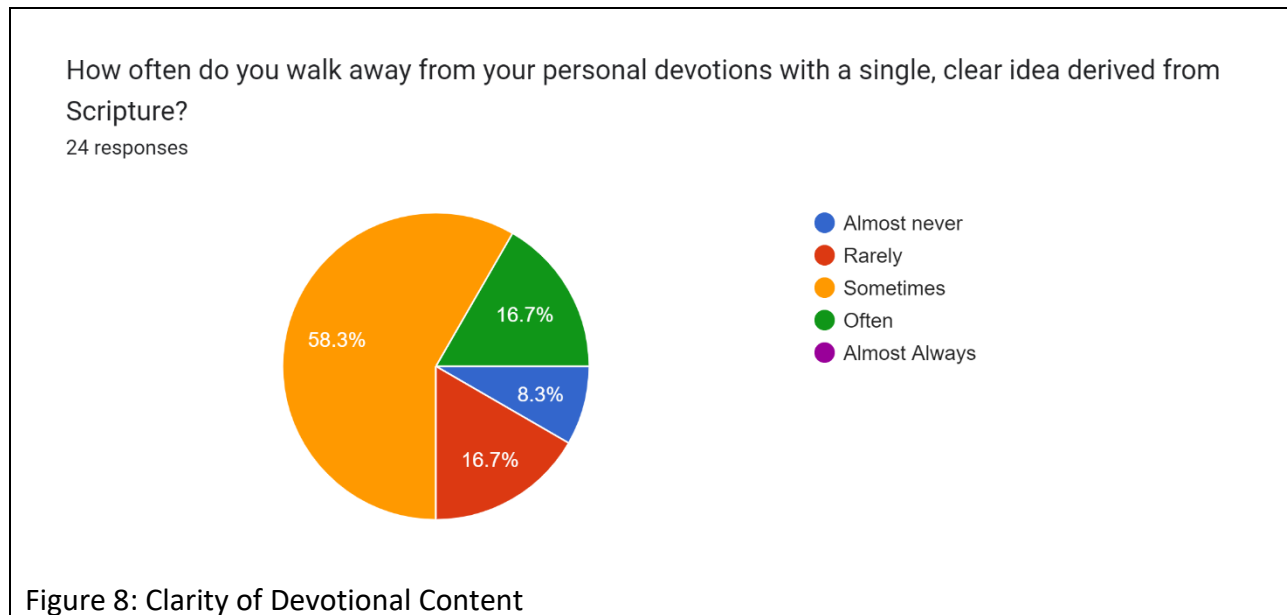
The following questions from the initial questionnaire were designed to capture baseline measurements of pertinent areas in the subjects' lives, in order to accurately gauge how these areas may be affected by adopting the Big Idea Devotions method. Each of these questions was mirrored in the closing questionnaire, to measure progress.

Satisfaction Level with Personal Devotions



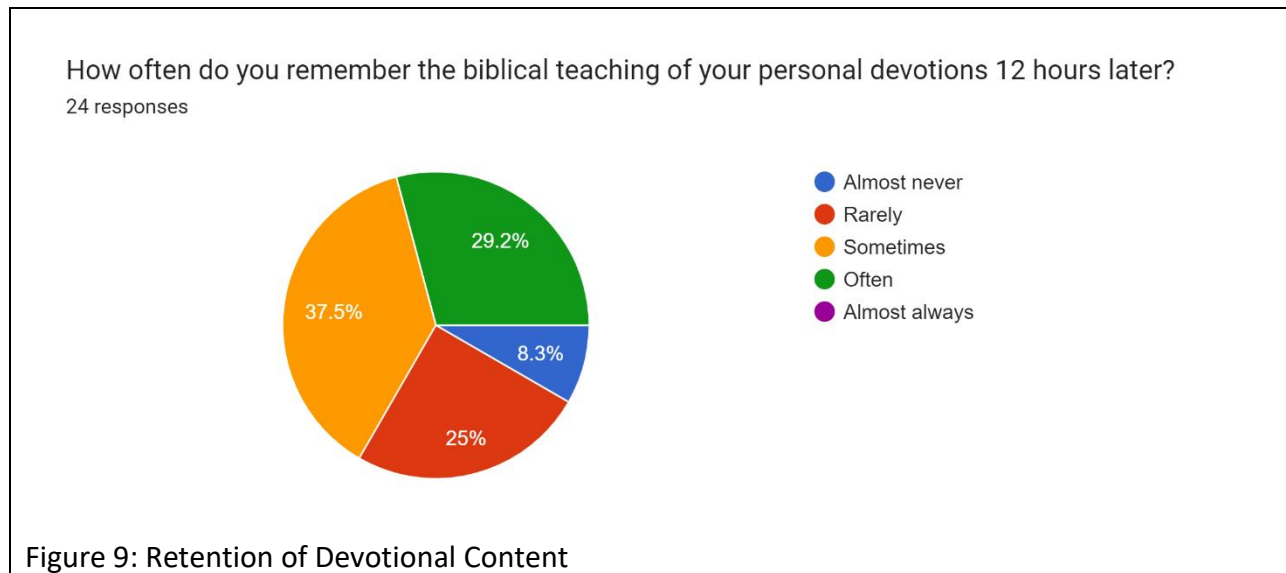
Consistent with my previous research which suggested that many pastors struggle in their daily intimacy with God (see chapter one), none of the subjects reported being “highly satisfied” with their devotional lives. Thankfully, there were also none who reported being “highly dissatisfied.” The most common answer was “mostly satisfied” (45.8%), followed by “somewhat satisfied” (33.3%) and “mostly dissatisfied” (20.8%). Numerous observations can be made from this data; for the purposes of this study it is significant that a majority (about 54%) of pastors reported being either “somewhat satisfied” or “mostly dissatisfied,” with their devotions, and none reported being “highly satisfied,” indicating a clear need for improvement.

Clarity of Devotional Content



Big Idea Devotions are based on the premise that our devotional lives are more effective when we emerge from our devotional times with a single, clear idea derived from Scripture. Only 16.7% of subjects reported “often” emerging from their devotional time with such clarity, and none of them reported experiencing this “almost always.” One-quarter of them reported “rarely” or “almost never” walking away with such clarity. Whether gaining such clarity is indeed helpful for nurturing spiritual intimacy is a separate issue, measured with other questions. But it’s significant to note that devotional clarity is not the typical experience for many pastors.

Retention of Devotional Content



Assuming a typical morning devotional time, this question was designed to measure how well participants tend to remember their devotional content that same evening (or, given an evening devotional time, how well they remembered it the following morning). None of the subjects reported retaining it “almost always,” and a full one-third reported retaining it either “rarely” or “almost never.” Only 29.2% reported remembering their devotional content “often”; the hope was that practicing Big Idea Devotions would increase this percentage significantly, and possibly even move some people into the “almost always” category.

Sharing of Devotional Content

How often do you find yourself sharing with others the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?

24 responses

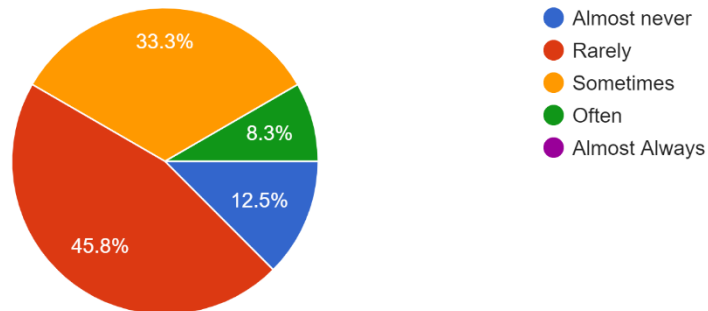


Figure 10: Sharing of Devotional Content

This was one of the more remarkable baseline findings. Keep in mind that the participants are all engaged in ministry—most of them as senior or associate pastors—which implies that they are often in a position to influence others spiritually. Surprisingly, 58% reported “rarely” or “almost never” sharing with others the biblical teaching they received in that day’s devotions. And only 8% “often” share such things. This is not to say that these ministry leaders rarely share biblical truth with others; only that the biblical truth they do share does not commonly carry the freshness of recent discovery from their devotional meetings with God. I anticipated significant improvement in this area through the practice of Big Idea Devotions.

Application of Devotional Content

How often do you take intentional action to apply the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?

24 responses

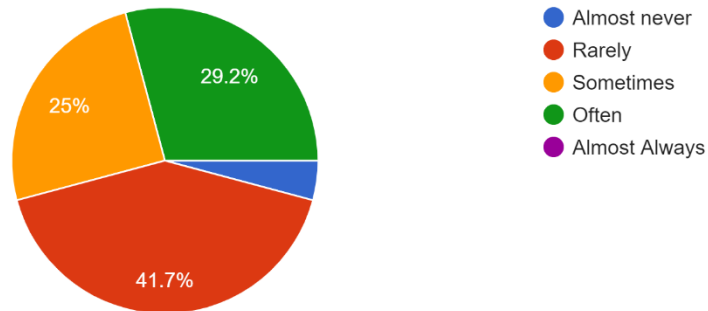


Figure 11: Application of Devotional Content

This was another surprising finding. Despite James' admonition to be doers, rather than just hearers of the Word (James 1:22), 46% of participants reported "rarely" or "almost never" taking intentional action to apply the biblical teaching they receive from their devotions on a given day. None of the participants reported such action "almost always." This strongly highlights the need and value of Big Idea Devotions, which provide a simple mechanism for practical application of the Word received.

Prayer Shaped by Devotional Content

How often is your daily prayer for yourself and others shaped by the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?

24 responses

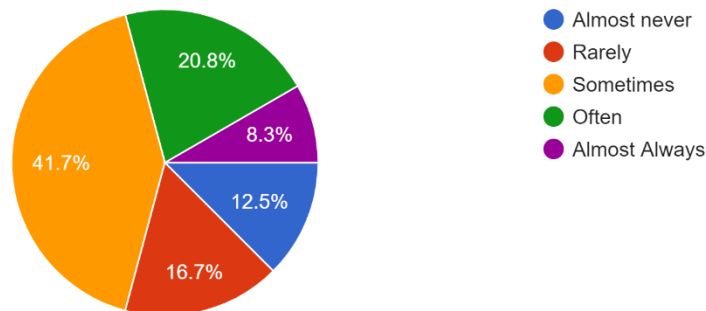


Figure 12: Prayer Shaped by Devotional Content

The response to this question was pleasantly surprising to me. Over 70% of participants reported that their daily prayer is at least sometimes shaped by the biblical content of that day's devotions, with almost 30% reporting such devotional-prayer connection "often" or "almost always." Although these numbers were somewhat encouraging, they can be viewed from a different perspective as well: about 70% of participants *do not* often have their prayers shaped from that day's devotions. My hope was that practicing Big Idea Devotions would lead to significant improvement in this area, as the method produces a simple, memorable prayer arising from each day's Scripture.

Sense of God's Presence

Over the past two weeks, how often have you felt a strong sense of God's presence in daily life?
24 responses

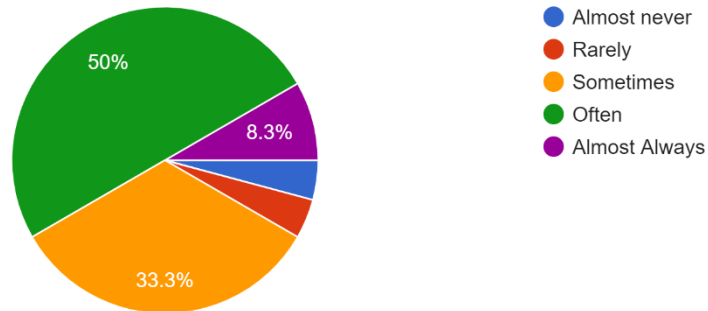


Figure 13: Sense of God's Presence

This question measured participants' subjective sense of God's presence in their ordinary lives. The formulation of this question was influenced by the Clergy Spiritual Well-Being Scale, developed in 2013 to measure spiritual health of United Methodist clergy.¹ The responses were somewhat encouraging, with 50% of participants reporting a strong sense of God's presence "often" in daily life, and another 8% answering "almost always." Would a more intentional daily interaction with the Word through Big Idea Devotions raise these numbers even higher? I was eager to find out.

1. Proeshold-Bell, Rae Jean; Yang, Chongming; Toth, Matthew; Corbitt Rivers, Monica; Carder, Kenneth; "Closeness to God Among Those Doing God's Work: A Spiritual Well-Being Measure for Clergy," *Journal of Religion and Health* 53(3) (February 12, 2013): 878-894.

Resonance Between Public Ministry and Personal Walk with God

Over the past two weeks, how often have you felt a strong resonance/integrity between your public ministry and your personal walk with God?

24 responses

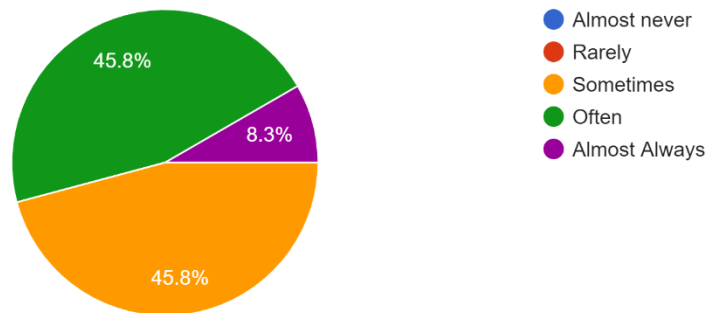


Figure 14: Resonance Between Public Ministry and Personal Walk with God

The final question measured participants' self-perception of integrity: to what degree did they sense an undivided unity between their private devotions and public ministry? The assumption is that a high self-perception of integrity is healthy and beneficial to one's spiritual well-being. The results were encouraging: there were no "rarely" or "almost never" responses. The majority of the responses were split evenly between "sometimes" and "often." While these numbers seemed strong, I was curious to see if practicing Big Idea Devotions would move the needle even further in a positive direction.

Survey Instruments

Three instruments were used to obtain quantitative and qualitative data and to evaluate the impact of the project on the lives of the participants.

Initial Questionnaire

The Initial Questionnaire was developed on Google Forms and delivered to each participant via an email link. The questionnaire was designed to collect the following data:

1. Demographic information
 - Age
 - Education level and time elapsed since most recent schooling
 - Ministry role
2. Understanding and utilization of Big Idea preaching
 - “How well do you understand Big Idea preaching?”
 - “How frequently do you practice Big Idea preaching in your ministry?”
3. Current frequency of personal devotions
4. Current assessment of devotional life
 - “What is your current level of satisfaction with your personal devotional life?”
 - “How often do you walk away from your personal devotions with a single, clear idea derived from Scripture?”
 - “How often do you remember the biblical teaching of your personal devotions 12 hours later?”
 - “How often do you find yourself sharing with others the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”

- “How often do you take intentional action to apply the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”
- “How often is your daily prayer for yourself and others shaped by the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”
- “Over the past two weeks, how often have you felt a strong sense of God’s presence in daily life?”
- “Over the past two weeks, how often have you felt a strong sense of resonance/integrity between your public ministry and your personal walk with God?”

The last set of questions was particularly beneficial, as they provided a baseline for each individual, giving the researcher the ability to measure the effectiveness of implementing Big Idea Devotions. The limitation of the questionnaire is that some of the questions are subjective in nature, and therefore more difficult to quantify. Nevertheless, the researcher trusted the accuracy of the self-evaluations and felt that they provided a reasonably reliable baseline.

Closing Questionnaire

The Closing Questionnaire was developed on Google Forms and delivered to each participant via an email link following their personal implementation of Big Idea Devotions. The questionnaire was designed to collect the following data:

1. Evaluation of the training provided by the researcher
2. Frequency and length of devotional sessions during the study
3. Success in implementing the fundamentals of Big Idea Devotions
4. Evaluation of the effectiveness of Big Idea Devotions (these questions mirrored the “current assessment of devotional life” questions from the Initial Questionnaire in order

to measure how practicing Big Idea Devotions affected the quality of participants' devotional lives).

- “How helpful was it for you to pray the Big Idea prayer for yourself?”
- “How helpful was it for you to pray the Big Idea prayer for others?”
- “How often did you return to your Big Idea prayer later in the day?”
- “How often did you remember the biblical teaching of your personal devotions 12 hours later?”
- “How often did you share with others the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”
- “How often did you take intentional action to apply the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”
- “On the days you were practicing Big Idea Devotions, how often did you feel a strong sense of God’s presence in daily life?”
- “On the days you were practicing Big Idea Devotions, how often did you feel a strong resonance/integrity between your public ministry and your personal walk with God?”
- “On the days you were practicing Big Idea Devotions, what was your overall level of satisfaction with your devotional life?”

5. Likelihood of utilizing Big Idea Devotions in the future
6. Additional comments about participant’s experience with Big Idea Devotions

Focus Group

The final assessment tool was an optional focus group, conducted via Zoom and held after all participants had completed the Closing Questionnaire. The following questions were asked:

1. “Overall, how would you describe the experience of participating in this project?”
2. “Was there anything confusing or unclear about how to do Big Idea Devotions?”
3. “What was the most helpful part of the project for you?”
4. “What was the least helpful part of the project for you?”
5. “If you haven’t typically used a journal for your devotions, how did you find the experience of using a journal?”
6. “If you haven’t typically used a prayer list, how did you find the experience of using a prayer list?”
7. “How could I improve the Big Idea Devotions concept to make it more helpful?”
8. “Do you see yourself incorporating any elements of Big Idea Devotions in your devotional life going forward? If so, what elements? If not, why not?”
9. “Do you feel that people who aren’t already trained in Big Idea Preaching could benefit from Big Idea Devotions? Why/why not?”
10. “Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Big Idea Devotions?”

Expected Outcomes

In one sense, it is impossible to accurately gauge the quality of one’s relationship with God. Spiritual intimacy is such a sacred, mysterious, personal experience that it cannot be reduced to objective measurements. On the other hand, true spiritual intimacy has outward

effects on a person's life, and these effects can be measured to some degree. This study is an attempt to measure some of what can be measured.

In the earlier chapters of this thesis-project, I established the premise that spiritual intimacy flows from two main "movements": *receiving* and *responding to* the Word of God. Through these movements, the believer maintains an active, ongoing relationship with God—receiving God's Word through reading and meditating on Scripture, and then responding to God's Word through prayer and obedience. As the practice of Big Idea Devotions has helped me to both receive and respond to God's Word more effectively, my hope was that it would be similarly helpful to others.

By providing clear instruction on Big Idea Devotions, assigning participants several weeks of implementing the practice, and measuring outcomes using questionnaires and a focus group, I was hoping to see significant positive impact on the devotional lives and spiritual intimacy of the participants. And I was hoping participants would find Big Idea Devotions so helpful that they would incorporate at least some elements of it in the personal devotional lives going forward.

As data is analyzed, it's important to consider the potential of response bias throughout this study. All participants knew the hypothesis being tested: that Big Idea Devotions can enhance people's spiritual intimacy by improving their devotional lives. Therefore, when providing feedback, there was the possibility that some participants would subconsciously or even consciously give answers that confirm the hypothesis. The fact that I have a personal relationship with several of the participants might have increased the possibility of such bias.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.
(James 1:23-25)

Introduction

This thesis-project addresses the problem of inadequate spiritual intimacy in the lives of pastors. The concept arose from the researcher's personal experience as a pastor and follower of Jesus: after struggling for years to maintain intimacy with God, I developed a devotional approach that utilized the same methods as those used in Big Idea preaching, and found it to be extremely beneficial for my devotional life, and hence for my spiritual intimacy. My hypothesis was that other pastors would see similar benefits in their own lives by implementing Big Idea Devotions. Participants received training in Big Idea Devotions, put this method into practice for three weeks, and assessed their experience through a questionnaire and a focus group.

In chapter one, I described the challenge of pastoral spiritual intimacy and introduced the concept of Big Idea Devotions. In chapter two, I explored the biblical and theological foundations for pursuing spiritual intimacy by exegeting John 15:1-17 and other pertinent Scriptures. In chapter three I reviewed the relevant literature on the pastoral struggle for spiritual intimacy, the primacy of the Word in intimacy with God, and the rationale for using a Big Idea approach in devotions. In chapter four, I presented the methodology and research

design that was used to test the hypothesis with a group of twenty-four pastors and spiritual leaders.

In this fifth chapter, I will present the results and conclusions of the project. I will present the data from the Closing Questionnaire, paying special attention to the questions that mirrored the baseline questions on the Initial Questionnaire, to measure the effect of implementing Big Idea Devotions. Since the Closing Questionnaire included one question that invited participants to share feedback in written form, I will include a sampling of responses to that question. I will also provide a sampling of comments and a summary of results from the focus group. Then I will summarize the results gathered from all instruments and offer some overall conclusions from the entire project, followed by ministry applications and areas for further study. And finally, I will share my personal reflections on this project.

Instrument Results

Since the results from the Opening Questionnaire were already reviewed in the previous chapter to describe the demographics and starting point of the participants, here I will present the results from the Closing Questionnaire and the focus group, followed by a summary of all instrument results.

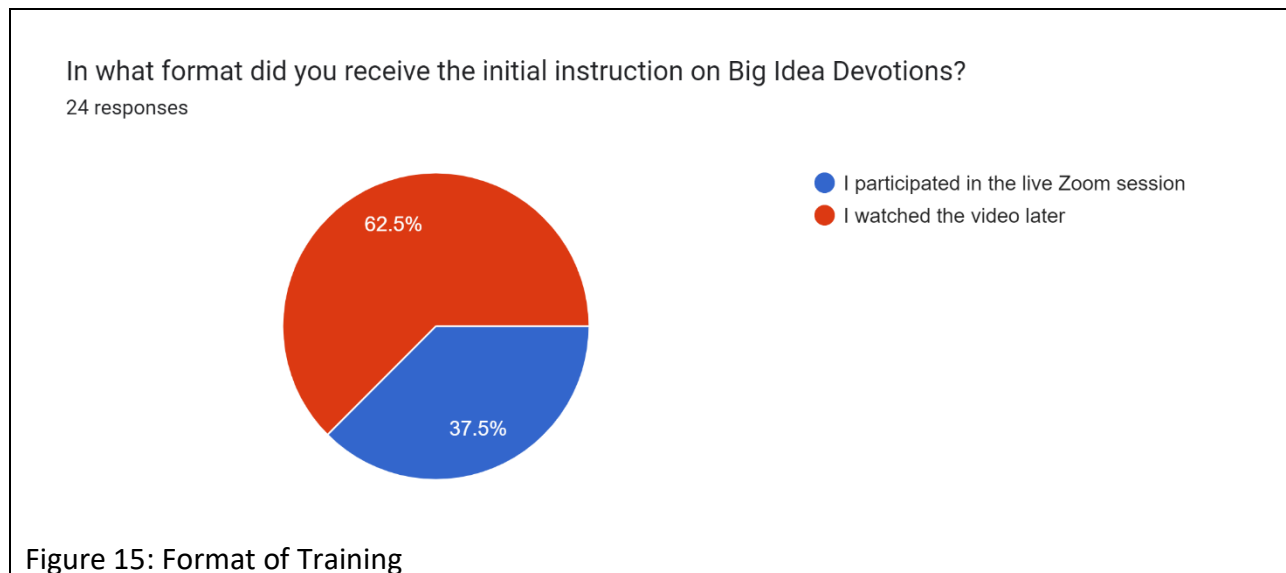
Closing Questionnaire

The Closing Questionnaire included 17 questions, broken down as follows:

- 2 questions assessing experience with the training session
- 2 questions reporting quantity and length of devotions during the study

- 2 questions assessing participants' success in carrying out the basic mechanics of Big Idea Devotions: formulating a subject, complement, and Big Idea prayer
- 3 questions assessing their actual use of the Big Idea prayer
- 6 questions measuring the effect of implementing Big Idea Devotions for three weeks by mirroring the baseline questions from the Opening Questionnaire
- 1 question about likelihood of implementing Big Idea Devotions in the future
- 1 write-in, open-ended question inviting further comments

Experience with the Training Session



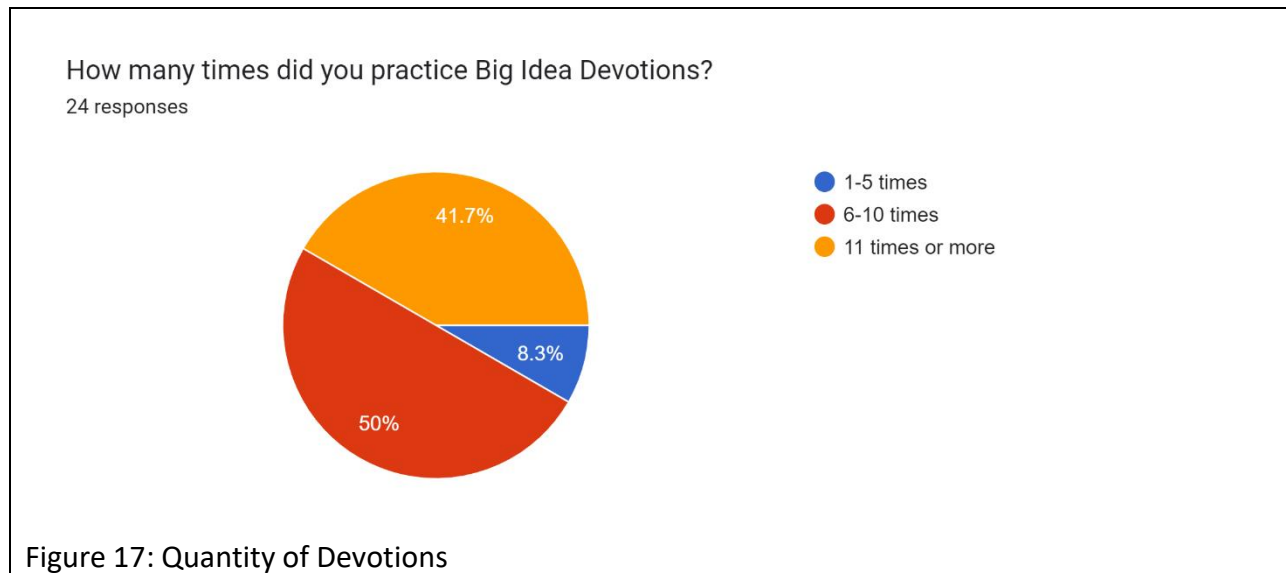
I conducted a live training session, via Zoom, on October 22, 2022. Although I did my best to schedule the training at a time that would fit the schedules of as many participants as possible, only nine participants were part of the live Zoom session. The remaining 16 watched the video of the training session, which was sent out the following day, on their own time. All

participants received detailed class notes, sent as a Word file, which were essentially the manuscript of the training session.



All 24 participants rated the training session as “Very Clear.” This was extremely encouraging to me as the instructor, and gave me a strong level of confidence that the participants began their own practice of Big Idea Devotions with a clear understanding of the method. It should also be borne in mind that all participants had at least some familiarity with Big Idea Preaching prior to this study, which likely aided their ability to grasp the concept of Big Idea Devotions. It would probably be more challenging to conduct a similar study with people who have no prior exposure to Big Idea concepts.

Quantity and Length of Devotions During the Study



Participants were assigned the entire letter of James as the devotional Scripture, divided into 14 short passages (I used pericopes, or units of thought, very similar to how I would divide passages for preaching). I asked all participants to engage in Big Idea Devotions at least ten times over the following two weeks, and I ended up allowing three weeks before I officially ended the window of practicing devotions by sending the Closing Questionnaire. While two of the participants only managed 1-5 devotional sessions, the other 22 practiced the method at least six times, with ten reporting 11 times or more. I feel this was a reasonable amount of experience to begin assessing the effects of Big Idea Devotions.

On the days that you practiced Big Idea Devotions, what was the average length of your devotional time?

24 responses

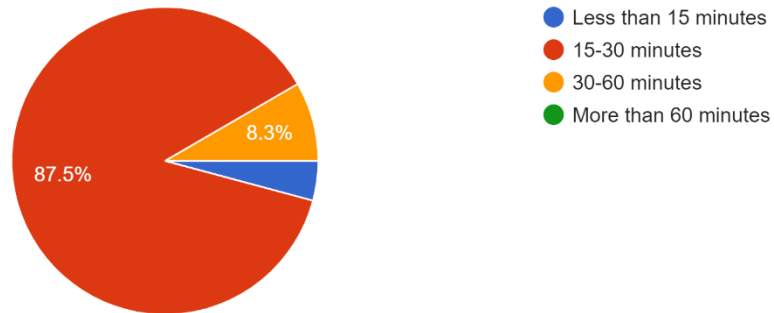
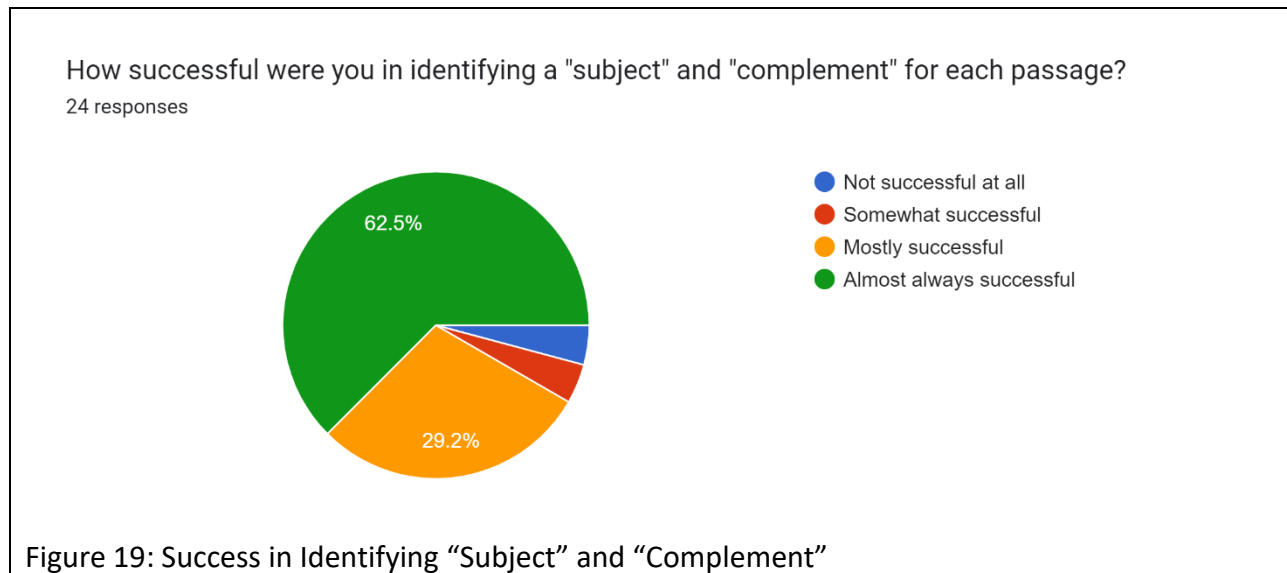


Figure 18: Length of Devotions

The vast majority (87.5%, or 21 participants) reported spending an average of 15-30 minutes in devotions during the study. This was a bit surprising to me, as I expected to hear of more participants spending more than 30 minutes. But, having personally experienced many devotional times of 15-30 minutes, I can attest that this length of time normally gives adequate opportunity to apply the method of Big Idea Devotions.

Success in Mechanics of Big Idea Devotions



Just as in its preaching counterpart, Big Idea Devotions involves identifying a "subject," defined as "what the passage is talking about" and a "complement," defined as "what the passage is saying about what it's talking about." I was encouraged to see that 15 out of the 24 subjects reported being "almost always successful" in this step, with another seven saying they were "mostly successful." Therefore, about 92% of participants had a comfortable grasp on this essential step.

How successful were you in writing a Big Idea prayer for each passage?

24 responses

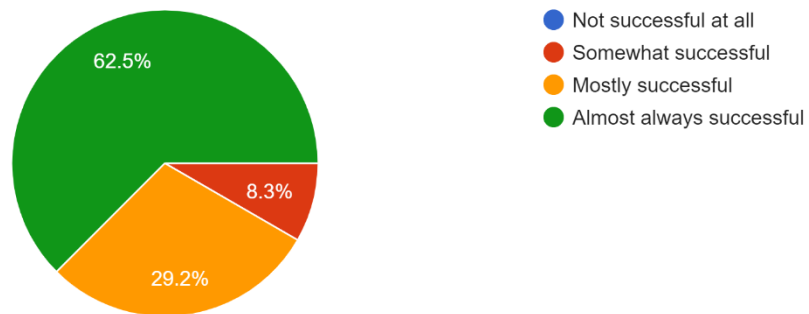
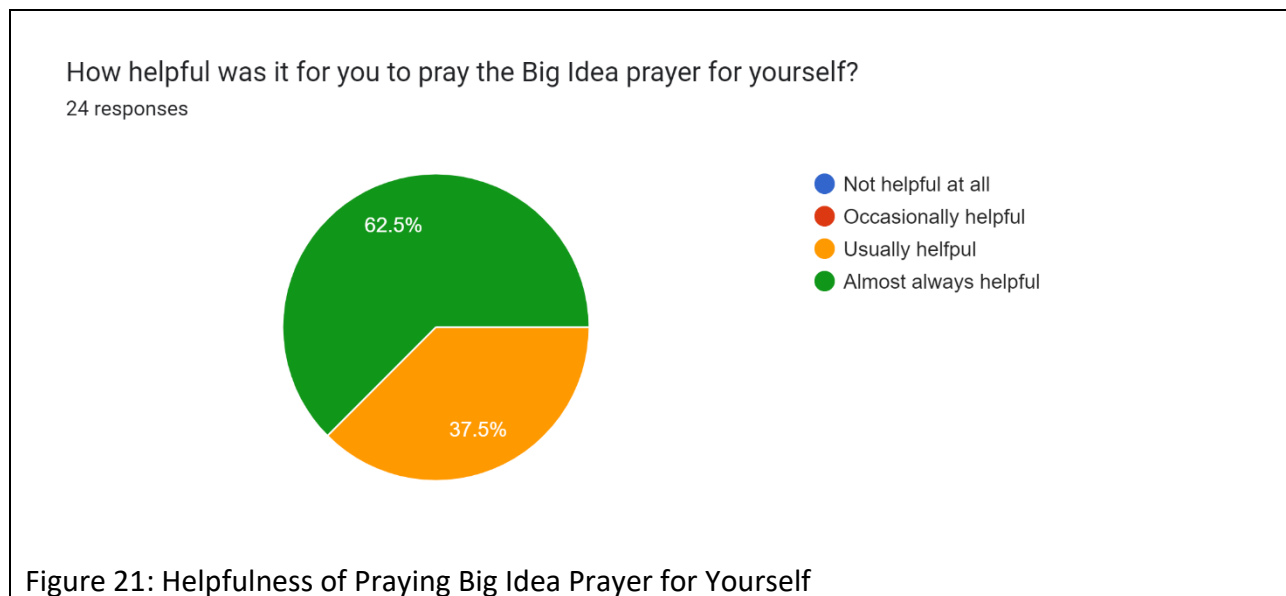


Figure 20: Success in Writing Big Idea Prayer

The main “deliverable” of Big Idea Devotions is a simple, clear, one-sentence prayer that asks God for the grace to personally apply the main teaching of that day’s Scripture. Because this prayer flows logically from the subject and complement, it was not surprising that these numbers were almost identical to those in the previous question. Again, it was extremely encouraging to see that about 92% of participants were successful in crafting these prayers.

Use of Big Idea Prayer



Since the Big Idea prayer is focused on personal application of the day's Scripture, this question is extremely important. It was encouraging to see that 100% of the participants found praying this prayer for themselves "almost always" or "usually" helpful, with 15 of the 24 participants rating it "almost always" helpful. In my personal experience, when my prayers for myself lacked a direct connection with Scripture, they tended to be unimaginative, self-centered, and repetitious. Adopting the Big Idea Devotions method deepened my personal prayers significantly, and the response to this question indicates that it may have had a similar effect on many of the participants.

How helpful was it for you to pray the Big Idea prayer for others?

24 responses

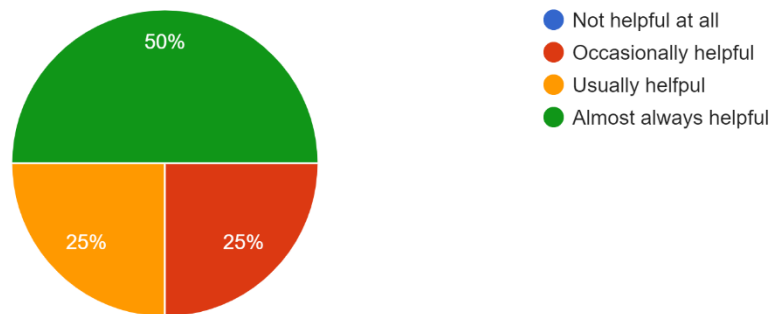


Figure 22: Helpfulness of Praying Big Idea Prayer for Others

Participants were instructed to utilize the Big Idea prayer to provide biblically-shaped direction for the prayers they prayed for others. They were encouraged to make use of a prayer list, using the provided journal to keep track of specific people to pray for each day. Participants reported that praying the Big Idea prayer for others was slightly less helpful than it was in their prayers for themselves (see previous question), but still quite helpful: 75% of participants found it “almost always” or “usually” helpful. In my own experience, adopting this method has provided biblical “teeth” to my prayers for the people in my life, which has in turn dramatically increased both the regularity and duration of my prayers for them. My hope is that the results indicate a similar enhancement of many participants’ intercessory prayer life.

How often did you return to your Big Idea prayer later in the day?

24 responses

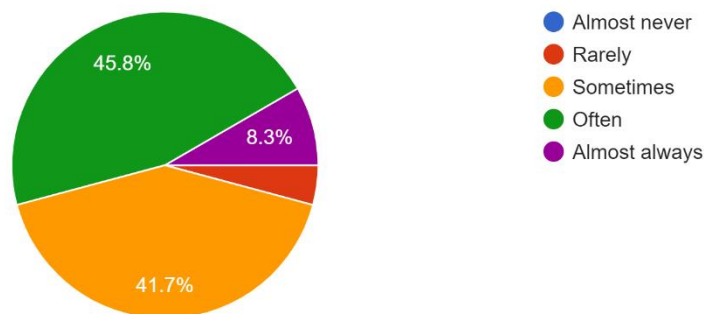


Figure 23: Frequency of Returning to Big Idea Prayer Later in Day

This question measured the “sticking power” of the Big Idea prayer, which is a very important feature of the method. It’s one thing to allow the day’s Scripture reading to shape one’s prayers *during* the devotional time; it’s another level of effectiveness if those Scripture-shaped prayers continue being prayed hours afterwards. Again, the results were encouraging. More than half—13 of the 24—participants reported returning to this prayer “often” or “almost always,” and another 10 experienced this “sometimes.” Remembering and praying this prayer later in the day doesn’t just enhance one’s prayer life and potentially unleash God’s blessings on the recipients of the prayer; it calls to mind the central teaching of that day’s Scripture, which has benefits that go far beyond its effect on prayer.

Before and After Measurements in Six Key Categories

The data provided in this section is possibly the most meaningful, since these six questions mirrored six questions in the Opening Questionnaire. By comparing the baseline measurements recorded at the outset of the study (“Before”) with the measurements recorded at the conclusion of the study (“After”), we have an indication of the change that Big Idea Devotions can produce in a person’s life over a three-week time period.

For each of the six questions, data will be presented in two forms: (1) The overall mean response before and after, showing the % change from before to after, and (2) The percentage of participants who answered “4” or “5” (the two most favorable responses) to each question before and after. Finally, two bar graphs will summarize these results: one graph depicting before-and-after mean responses for all six questions, and one graph depicting before-and-after percentage of 4s and 5s for all six questions. (If the reader would like to skip the numerical data and go immediately to the graphs, turn to page 131).

Question #1: Devotional Satisfaction

Opening Questionnaire: “What is your current level of satisfaction with your personal devotional life?”

Closing Questionnaire: “During the time you were practicing Big Idea Devotions, what was your overall level of satisfaction with your personal devotional life?”

Overall mean response *before*: 3.25

Overall mean response *after*: 4.29

Percentage change from before to after: +32%

% of Participants answering “4” or “5” *before*: 46%

% of Participants answering “4” or “5” *after*: 88%

Question #2: Remembering Biblical Teaching

Opening Questionnaire: "How often do you remember the biblical teaching of your personal devotions 12 hours later?"

Closing Questionnaire: "How often did you remember the biblical teaching of your personal devotions 12 hours later?"

Overall mean response *before*: 2.88

Overall mean response *after*: 4.13

Percentage change from before to after: +43%

% of Participants answering "4" or "5" *before*: 29%

% of Participants answering "4" or "5" *after*: 83%

Question #3: Sharing Biblical Teaching

Opening Questionnaire: "How often do you find yourself sharing with others the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?"

Closing Questionnaire: "How often did you share with others the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?"

Overall mean response *before*: 2.38

Overall mean response *after*: 2.5

Percentage change from before to after: +5%

% of Participants answering "4" or "5" *before*: 8%

% of Participants answering "4" or "5" *after*: 17%

Question #4: Applying Biblical Teaching

Opening Questionnaire: “How often do you take intentional action to apply the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”

Closing Questionnaire: “How often did you take intentional action to apply the biblical teaching that you received in your devotions that day?”

Overall mean response *before*: 2.79

Overall mean response *after*: 3.5

Percentage change from before to after: +25%

% of Participants answering “4” or “5” *before*: 29%

% of Participants answering “4” or “5” *after*: 42%

Question #5: Sense of God’s Presence

Opening Questionnaire: “Over the past two weeks, how often have you felt a strong sense of God’s presence in daily life?”

Closing Questionnaire: “On the days you were practicing Big Idea Devotions, how often did you feel a strong sense of God’s presence in daily life?”

Overall mean response *before*: 3.54

Overall mean response *after*: 3.92

Percentage change from before to after: +11%

% of Participants answering “4” or “5” *before*: 58%

% of Participants answering “4” or “5” *after*: 75%

Question #6: Private/Public Resonance

Opening Questionnaire: "Over the past two weeks, how often have you felt a strong resonance/integrity between your public ministry and your personal walk with God?"

Closing Questionnaire: "On the days you were practicing Big Idea Devotions, how often did you feel a strong resonance/integrity between your public ministry and your personal walk with God?"

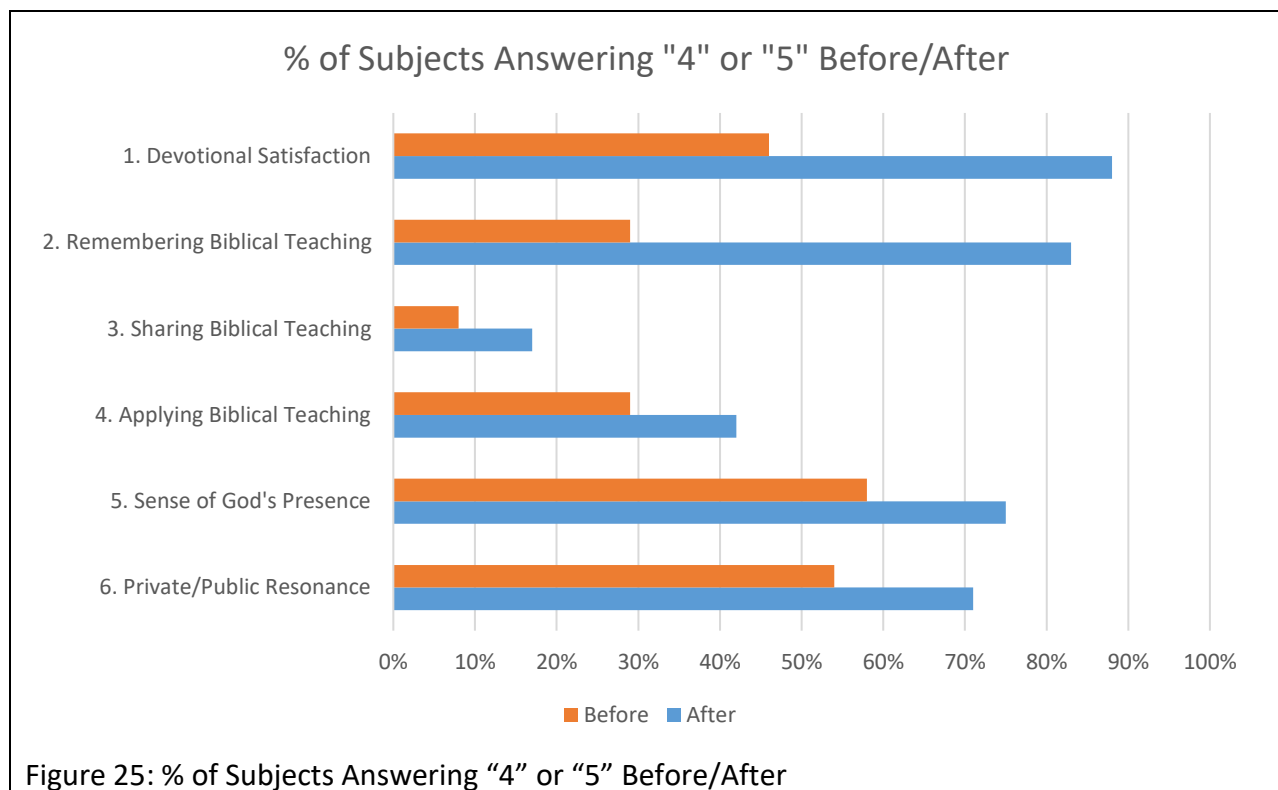
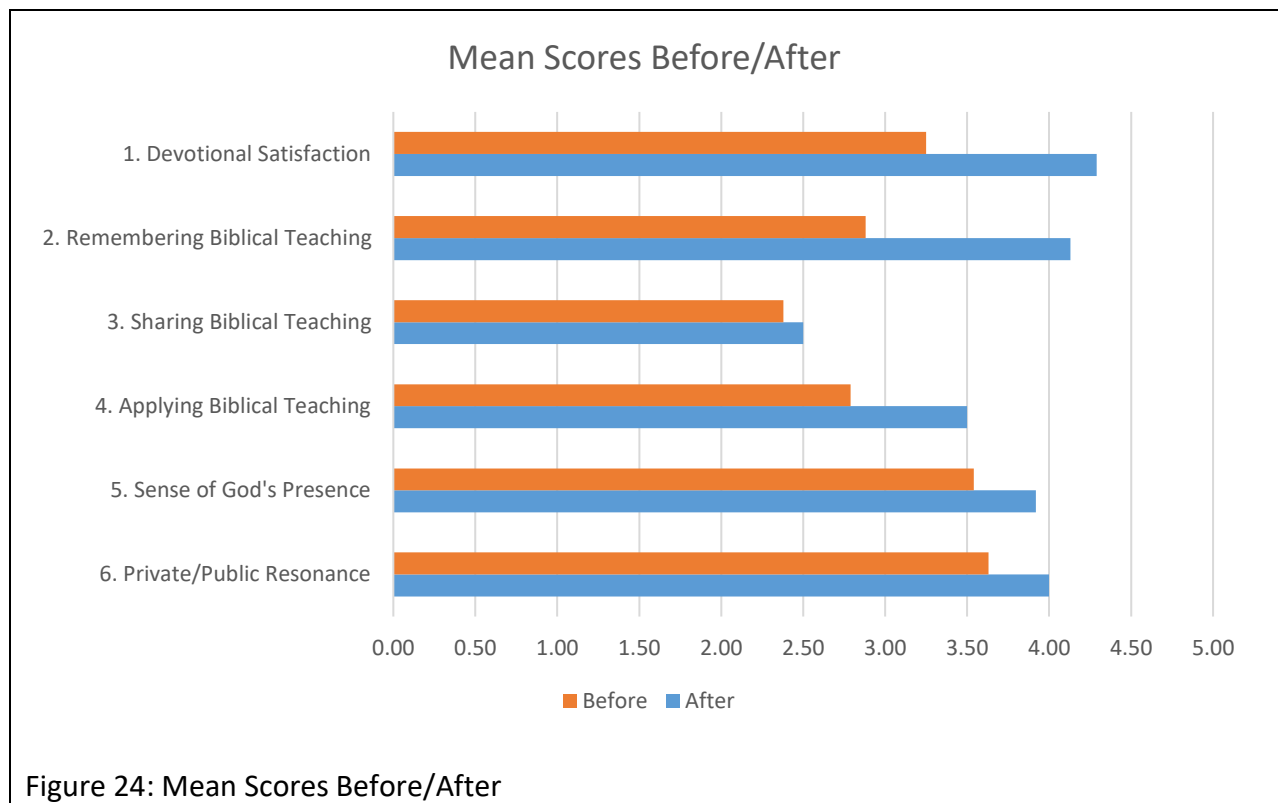
Overall mean response *before*: 3.63

Overall mean response *after*: 4.0

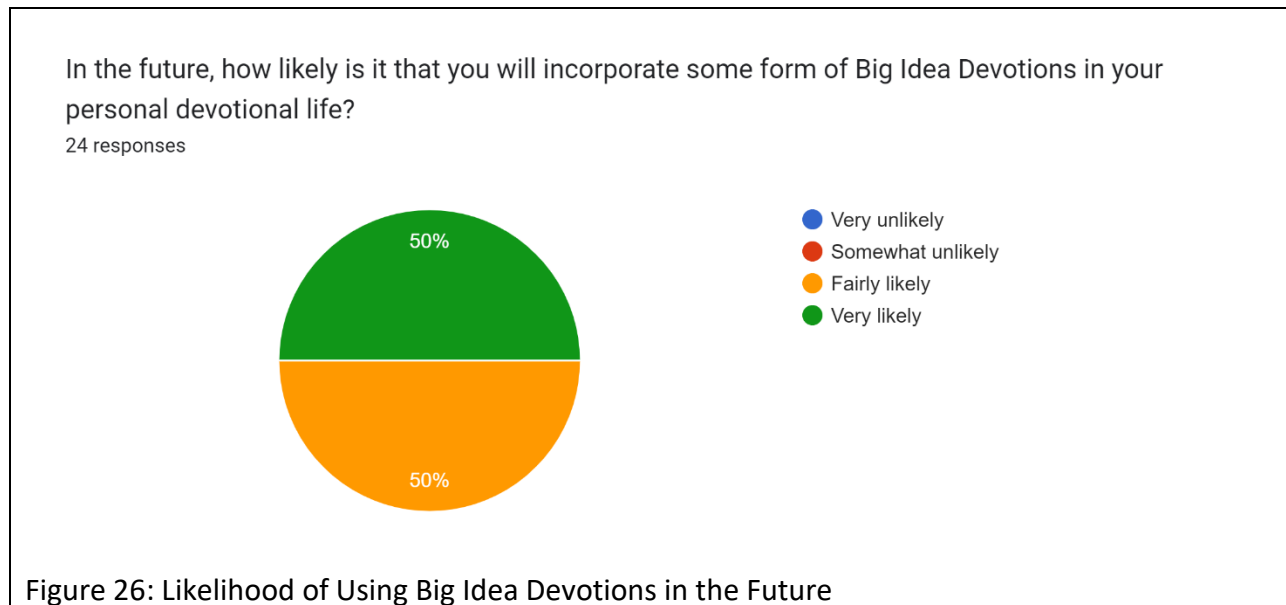
Percentage change from before to after: +10%

% of Participants answering "4" or "5" *before*: 54%

% of Participants answering "4" or "5" *after*: 71%



Likelihood of Implementing Big Idea Devotions in the Future



100% of the participants see Big Idea Devotions playing some role in their future devotional life. Half of the participants said such future use is “very likely,” and the other half said it’s “fairly likely.” This was very encouraging to me, and helps to confirm my hypothesis that pastors would find this to be a valuable tool in deepening their spiritual intimacy. At the same time, the possibility of response bias must again be considered. Many of the participants have a personal relationship with me through church or school, which could have subconsciously influenced them to answer this question (and others) in a way that confirmed what they assumed I was hoping to see. However, I believe the many enthusiastic write-in comments and focus group responses (summarized in the next two sections) indicate a genuine appreciation of Big Idea Devotions and a true likelihood that participants will implement this method in the future.

Open-Ended Feedback on Big Idea Devotions

The final question on the Closing Questionnaire was a write-in question: “Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Big Idea Devotions?”

Below I will give a sampling of responses, followed by some summarizing conclusions. (The full, unabridged responses to this question can be found in Appendix D).

Sampling of responses to Open-Ended Feedback Question

PARTICIPANT 4: “Wow, great discipline for focused study, meditation and application. Thank you...”

PARTICIPANT 10: “This is a very good model for personal devotions. Also very helpful to preachers as it trains you to start looking for the big idea with every passage. I'm looking forward to continuing this in my devotionals!”

PARTICIPANT 6: “I think big idea with subject and complement comes easier to some. I am not a wordsmith so this was harder for me but I embrace the concept as a good one. I think it will be powerful for more creative people.”

PARTICIPANT 3: “My only concern is that it becomes to [sic] mechanical, otherwise a great concept.”

PARTICIPANT 11: “I loved this idea—so often I have read Scripture in the morning as a devotion and later on—sometimes even an hour later, I can hardly remember what I read. This was so good to focus and wrestle a little with the text to come up with the subject and complement and then intentionally try to apply them to my life. My intention is to continue to practice this style of devotions...The only tweak for me will be that I am going to try to do the initial work and prayer on one day and then the next day come back and reread the same passage and continue to pray and focus on it. For me, I think that will help to further build the ideas and concepts in that Scripture into my life, instead of moving on right away to the next passage.”

PARTICIPANT 14: “Thank you so much for creating this connection between big idea preaching and personal devotions. I've been utilizing the big idea in my preaching for as long as I've been preaching, but I always thought of it as a useful tool for other people's spiritual growth, never my own. I never connected the dots that this tool that was useful for everyone else could also be useful for me in my own personal devotions. Your method is so clear, memorable, and easy to incorporate into my personal devotions that it something I definitely carry with me into the future. Thank you again!”

PARTICIPANT 16: "Honestly, this may be one of the best devotional techniques I've ever done."

PARTICIPANT 18: "I think pushing the Big Idea past Homiletical and into a short, crystalized prayer was the most innovative part and something I will take with me even as I prepare sermons."

PARTICIPANT 20: "It was an excellent median for a pastor between just reading the Bible devotionally and exegeting a passage."

PARTICIPANT 21: "It brought an intentionality to my devotions that was much needed."

PARTICIPANT 22: "I appreciated this approach quite a bit! It helped engage my "preacher brain" in a way that was productive for the development of my private walk with Jesus. I enjoyed the process of identifying the "Big Idea" and found it much easier to be in prayer for myself and others throughout the day - and it's amazing how relevant each prayer was to my circumstances almost every day I participated."

Summarizing Conclusions from Write-In Question

First of all, I was happy to see that although answering this question was optional, 22 out of the 24 participants took the time to share their thoughts. And overall, the feedback was extremely positive. Several people noted how satisfying it was to bring unity between the way they handle the Word in their professional and devotional lives. Multiple people commented on how much this method enhanced their prayer lives. In general, there seemed to be an appreciation for the level of structure this brought to people's devotional practices. The feedback was not all positive: one person found the formulation of the subject/complement/prayer to be very difficult, one was concerned that it may be too mechanical, and several commented that receiving a brand new Big Idea Prayer every day could be overwhelming. Taken as a whole, it seems that people were eager to share their feedback on Big Idea Devotions and almost all were enthusiastic about their experience.

Summarizing Conclusions from Closing Questionnaire

By mining the data from all 17 questions on the Closing Questionnaire, the following conclusions can be made:

- The training session was very clear and participants were well-equipped to begin implementing Big Idea Devotions immediately.
- The Big Idea prayer was helpful primarily for praying for oneself, and secondarily in praying for others. It was very common for participants to return to the Big Idea prayer later in the day.
- Implementing Big Idea Devotions for three weeks produced the greatest improvement in two areas: remembering the biblical teaching of devotions later in the day, and overall satisfaction with devotions.
- More modest improvement was seen in three areas: applying the biblical teaching of devotions, sensing God's presence throughout the day, and feeling resonance between private spirituality and public ministry.
- Very little improvement was seen in the degree to which biblical truth from devotions is shared with others. Interestingly, this area measured relatively low both before and after participation in the study.
- There was an overall sense of delight, enjoyment, appreciation, and excitement for Big Idea devotions. Every participant indicated a likelihood of personally implementing this devotional method in the future.

Focus Group

On November 14, 2022, I conducted a focus group via Zoom. Six (25%) of the study participants were part of the focus group. Below I will give a sampling of comments from each of the focus group questions, followed by some summarizing conclusions. A full transcript of the focus group can be found in Appendix E.

Sampling of Comments from Focus Group

1. Overall, how would you describe the experience of participating in this project?

FG PARTICIPANT A: "Being in seminary now, I struggle to do devotions well, because I keep on overdoing them, and then it becomes more like a project than personal devotion. So this was really good to kind of just re-focus a bit."

FG PARTICIPANT B: "The main idea for me was that there was something sticking to me that typically wasn't. So I found a lot of value in it."

2. Was there anything confusing or unclear about how to do Big Idea Devotions? Did you find yourself getting stuck or confused, or were you able to hit the ground running?

FG PARTICIPANT B: "I thought (the instructions) were clear. I had to keep going back to your examples to make sure I was kind of tight with subject/complement..."

FG PARTICIPANT E: "I thought the instructions were clear; my application, maybe not so. The area I kind of messed up on was the meditation part; I checked all the boxes, but at the beginning, failed to meditate on it. So I did a correction about halfway through it."

3. What was the most helpful part of the project for you?

FG PARTICIPANT B: "...there was just a degree of clarity that I'm not getting in my own devotional life."

FG PARTICIPANT D: "I think what helped is that it fell somewhere between full exegetical study, where you're really digging in, and being—sometimes we do more of a devotional reading—you're not really grasping what the text saying. So this is somewhere in between that."

4. Was there any part that you didn't find helpful?

No one commented on this question.

5. If you haven't typically used a journal for your devotions, how did you find the experience of using a journal?

FG PARTICIPANT B: "Forces you to slow down and formulate the thought. You can't formulate a thought and be lazy at the same time."

6. If you haven't typically used a prayer list, how did you find the experience of using a prayer list?

FG PARTICIPANT C: "I like the idea of praying Scripture over them and for them. That was different for me."

7. How could I improve the Big Idea Devotions concept to make it more helpful?

FG PARTICIPANT B: "I see tremendous value on just focusing on a pericope—that's what I preach. But I'd be curious to address—some of you out there are reading a chapter a day, or 3-4 chapters a day. How would this fit...?"

FG PARTICIPANT D: "I wonder what this could look like on your example page if you gave examples from different genres of Scripture."

8. Do you see yourself incorporating any elements of Big Idea Devotions in your devotional life going forward? If so, what elements? If not, why not?

FG PARTICIPANT A: "I'm just going to steal this and keep doing it. In terms of simplicity and that balance, I found this so enriching that I'm just going to keep chugging along with it."

FG PARTICIPANT B: "Even my preaching in the last week or so—it just feels tighter—the whole prep time. So thank you for that—it's super cool. And I think it will continue to be that way."

FG PARTICIPANT C: "I would hope the Big Idea prayer sticks. So regardless of what I'm doing, I like that: converting the core idea into a prayer."

9. Do you feel that people who aren't already trained in Big Idea Preaching could benefit from Big Idea Devotions? Why/why not?

FG PARTICIPANT F: "'Normal people' will have a hard time coming up with the big idea from a passage, especially if the passage has multiple possible big ideas."

FG PARTICIPANT B: "Folks in my congregation—I'd love to walk them through some of these steps."

FG PARTICIPANT A: "I would really encourage it to be taught to the 'normal' people. It's like any skill—you don't jump right into the most advanced part; you help people begin working these muscles. I think there's something here that can be so beneficial to so many people."

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Big Idea Devotions?

FG PARTICIPANT B: "I hope you run with it. I think it can be an incredible tool for the kingdom. I haven't come across a tool like this for the broader church. We can't overemphasize the need to disciple people."

FG PARTICIPANT A: "I'd love to see a manual to unpack this, for those who don't have any practice in Big Idea thought. I think it's a really neat tool that can do a lot for the church."

Summarizing Conclusions from Focus Group

This was an extremely encouraging conversation in general, with lots of enthusiasm and gratitude expressed, and I gleaned some helpful insights. I heard two themes that could almost seem contradictory, but ultimately I think they are both valid. On the one hand, people valued the exegetical element this approach brings—multiple people expressed how much they appreciated adding a level of structure to their devotional times that had been missing. On the other hand, others expressed that their devotions have tended to be *too* structured, and they appreciated the prayerful, soul-level elements of the method, especially in its emphasis on meditation and prayer. Taken together, it was encouraging to hear that for many, Big Idea Devotions strike a helpful balance between structural and relational, between head and heart. Several people expressed gratitude for how the method enhanced their prayer life, tying it to Scripture and reminding them to pray for others.

Regarding the training, several people commented on how valuable the specific examples were and how frequently they went back and referred to them; others suggested adding some examples from different biblical genres (all of my examples were from epistles).

Most of the participants encouraged me to continue developing this tool and offer it to the broader community of pastors, and several felt that it's a tool that could and should be offered in some form to laypeople.

Summary of All Instruments

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data from the two questionnaires and the focus group produced some exciting results. Here is a summary of the most significant findings:

- **The training was effective.** The training session was very clear, and participants felt well-equipped to begin implementing Big Idea Devotions on their own.
- **The method was doable.** Participants were generally able to carry out the method successfully, with the normal challenges of grappling with Scripture.
- **Devotional satisfaction improved.** Implementing Big Idea Devotions produced a fairly dramatic rise in the satisfaction level of personal devotions. They appreciated the focus it brought to their devotions, engaging both their head and their heart more deeply.
- **Retention increased.** Along with level of satisfaction with devotions (mentioned in the previous bullet), this was the most significant area of effectiveness: people retained the biblical teaching of their devotions significantly better than they did before the study.
- **Prayer improved.** Participants reported improvement in their prayer lives by shaping their prayers through Scripture and wording them in a way that was conducive to returning to them throughout the day.
- **Several areas saw modest improvement.** A subjective sense of God's presence, a resonance between private devotions and public ministry life, and personal application of the Word saw modest improvement.

- **No effect on sharing the Word with others.** There was no significant improvement in the degree to which participants shared the biblical teaching of their devotions with others.
- **Overall Enthusiasm.** Participants were extremely receptive to the method, consistently expressed enthusiasm and gratitude for being exposed to it, indicated their intention to continue using it personally, and encouraged me to continue developing it and offering it to others.

Conclusions

The most important question to answer is whether or not my hypothesis was confirmed. Did practicing Big Idea Devotions lead to deeper spiritual intimacy in the lives of the participants? The answer is a qualified “yes.”

I base my “yes” on the measured effectiveness of several key areas. There were undeniable improvements in two main areas, both of which contribute strongly to spiritual intimacy: devotional satisfaction and retention of biblical content. Devotional satisfaction indicates that a person is enjoying his/her time with God, which will likely lead to more frequent, rich devotional times—more time lingering in God’s presence and being shaped by his Word. And greater retention of biblical content means that people are allowing God’s Word to remain in them (John 15:7), continuing to hear the voice of God through the living Word throughout the day.

In addition, practicing Big Idea Devotions led to more modest but still measurable increases in participants’ intentional application of Scripture, their sense of integrity between

their private walk with God and their public ministry, and their sense of God's presence in everyday life. I would have liked to see a more dramatic rise in sensing God's presence, since it would seem to speak directly to the hypothesis, but this may have been limited by the fact that people reported this fairly high to begin with, so there wasn't a lot of room for improvement. In addition to all this, participants found the Big Idea prayer a helpful tool in praying biblically for themselves and others. All of this points to a likely confirmation of my hypothesis.

Having said that, I also realize I need to hold this conclusion loosely because there were some limitations to this study. First and foremost, it was a very short-term study. Practicing Big Idea Devotions for 2-3 weeks was a great start, but more reliable data would be gathered if the study were repeated for a longer period of time. Similarly, 24 participants was a nice sample size for my purposes, but the data would be more robust if there were a larger group of subjects. One additional limitation comes from the fact that I personally know 14 of the 24 participants. This personal relationship could have caused survey bias, most likely in the form of a desire (consciously or not) to help me confirm my hypothesis. More reliable data might be gleaned by repeating this study with a researcher who is personally unknown to the subjects.

Despite those limitations, I am reasonably confident that my hypothesis has been confirmed. Practicing Big Idea Devotions on a short-term basis has proven to enhance the spiritual life of pastors and other spiritual leaders in a way that deepens their intimacy with God. I believe this tool could play an important role in helping pastors avoid the hypocrisy that so often plagues their profession, providing a daily framework for receiving and responding to the Word of God and thereby helping them to walk in integrity. There is much further exploring to be done, but this study has provided an exciting foundation from which to build.

In the second chapter of this thesis-project, I provided an exegesis of John 15:1-17, Jesus' invitation to "remain in me," using the metaphor of branches remaining vitally attached to a vine. The case was made that "remaining in Christ" includes, first of all, a subjective element: living in conscious awareness of and dependence on the living Christ. In addition, remaining in Christ involves a more objective element: receiving and retaining the propositional content of the Word—much like Mary did as she sat at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42).

It is in this objective dimension that Big Idea Devotions provide the most help. Through the formulation of the Big Idea prayer, which encapsulates the core teaching of each day's devotional Scripture, we can receive God's Word in a clear and memorable way. Then, by carrying that prayer with us throughout the day, the word is effectively remaining in us (John 15:7), biblically setting the stage for us to pray, obey, bear fruit, bring glory to God, and experience joy, all in life-giving union with the Vine, Jesus. Through Big Idea Devotions, I have seen this dynamic play out in my own life and now in the lives of twenty-four other pastors. I'm excited to see the benefits extend to more people.

Ministry Applications

There are several contexts in which Big Idea Devotions could prove useful. Since I am most confident that the method is graspable by pastors and others with theological training, it would be an excellent discipline in which to train a church staff. Adopting Big Idea terminology could provide a common language for staff conversations as they discuss biblical passages, lessons, sermons, etc.

I also believe this could provide great benefit to those who are currently enrolled in theological education, especially if that education includes training in Big Idea preaching. As students are beginning to master the techniques of Big Idea preaching, I could envision offering a seminar in which they learn to apply those same skills to their devotional lives. From my experience, I believe this would have reciprocal benefit: it would enhance their devotional life, and as a result of the daily devotional practice of Big Idea thinking, their sermon-preparation skills would grow at an accelerated pace. Since I have been using this devotional method, the improvement in my sermon-writing has been undeniable, and this benefit was mentioned by several participants in my study.

Speaking of preaching, I would like to experiment with offering a Big Idea prayer at the conclusion of sermons. I essentially do this already in my closing prayer, but I believe there could be value in wording in precisely and concisely as part of my sermon prep. This could provide an opportunity to crystallize the sermon's Big Idea, clarify the call to action, and remind the flock of their dependence on God through prayer. I'd like to show the Big Idea prayer on the screen and invite the congregation to pray it in unison before being sent out.

And finally, I believe there are some church laypeople who, despite their lack of formal theological training, could grasp and benefit from Big Idea Devotions. There could be a discipleship class offered in which the training course in this study is adapted to include more basic grounding in Big Idea concepts, and then a similar process of participants trying the method on their own and regrouping to share their experience with others, perhaps over a period of several weeks or an entire church semester.

Areas for Future Research

As indicated earlier, there are several ways in which this research could be expanded upon. One fairly easy step would be to follow up on the 24 participants in this study after a period of time has elapsed—perhaps six months or a year. A questionnaire could be administered, asking whether and how they are still utilizing aspects of Big Idea Devotions in their personal devotional lives. It would be interesting to see how well this method has stuck with them, after such a brief exposure.

It would also be worthwhile to repeat a similar study to this, but over a longer period of time. In other words, instead of just 2-3 weeks of implementing Big Idea Devotions, ask subjects to practice the method over an entire church or seminary semester, with regular check-ins along the way. This longer time period would provide enough time to apply the method to various genres of Scripture. Would a longer practice period confirm or even increase the benefits seen in my study, or would it be revealed that there's an initial "Big Idea Devotions Honeymoon Period," after which the benefits fade?

As mentioned earlier, there may be more reliable data produced if the study were repeated with a larger group of subjects, and if none of the subjects had a personal relationship with the researcher.

And finally, it would be fascinating to see how well Big Idea Devotions are embraced by laypeople without any formal theological training. As someone in my focus group mentioned, there is a vast range of theological knowledge and aptitude within most church families, likely including some who possess the biblical and analytical aptitude to truly appreciate and benefit

from Big Idea Devotions. It would be worthwhile to repeat a study like this with a group of such people, and see how the results differ from those in this study.

Personal Reflections

This has been an extremely enriching experience for me. Since practicing Big Idea Devotions has had such a profound impact on me, I found this to be a highly personal and somewhat vulnerable exercise. I was “going public” with something that has become precious to me, not knowing how it would be received. And I can honestly say it was received more favorably than I had even hoped. There is a clear hunger among pastors for a better devotional life, and I am deeply grateful this tool may serve that purpose for some.

Completing this study also represents a very appropriate culmination of my DMin studies. The first year of this program was so timely and formative for me, with its emphasis on the personal calling and integrity of the pastor. This influenced the way I constructed my Personal Learning Covenant, particularly my commitment to utilizing a journal as a central piece of my devotional life. Shortly afterward, the review of Big Idea Preaching in the DMin courses led me to incorporate Big Idea methods in my daily devotional journal, and it just stuck. I continue to practice Big Idea devotions day in and day out, and it has been extremely rewarding to take what God has given me and extend it outward for the benefit of others. I am highly motivated to do that in the days to come.

This process has changed me. It’s one thing to develop a devotional method and benefit from it personally. It’s a whole other level of intensity to analyze that method in the context of biblical theology and Christian devotional approaches through the centuries, write a training

course, implement the training with actual pastors, and objectively measure the effectiveness in the lives of participants. Although painful at times, the process has caused me to grow on many levels—personally, professionally, and spiritually. I’ve become better pastor, a more clear biblical thinker, and I’m more confident that, by God’s grace, I have something valuable to offer to the community of pastors and beyond. For all of this, I am deeply grateful.

I close with a final Big Idea prayer...

Subject: How can I leverage my personal experience and thesis-project learnings to help others deepen their intimacy with God?

Complement: By seeking and taking opportunities to teach the practice of Big Idea Devotions.

Big Idea Prayer: “Father, Big Idea Devotions have been your gift to me; now keep me faithful to pass this gift to many others.”

APPENDIX A
TRAINING SESSION NOTES

Big Idea Devotions

Initial Training Session

Dave Gustavsen, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to test an idea:

I believe the Big Idea is an effective way to approach not only preaching, but also personal devotions.

Why would I say that? For the same reason that Big Idea preaching works: when we hear a good Big Idea sermon, we walk away with one clear idea ringing in our ears. It's the main point of the biblical passage, and therefore it's the main point of the sermon, and it sticks with us long after the message is over. In my experience, the same thing happens in Big Idea Devotions! You walk away from your morning time with God with one clear idea ringing in your ears. It's the main point of the Scripture you read that morning; it guides your prayers for yourself and others; it becomes the nugget that intentionally apply to your own life that day, and you look for opportunities to share it with others throughout the day.

I've been using a Big Idea approach to my own devotions for about the past two years, and I am enjoying my relationship with God more than I have in my entire Christian life. I'm carrying God's Word with me throughout the day. I'm praying more intentionally and biblically for people than I ever have. This has been a game-changer for me.

So the purpose of this project is to see if I'm the only one, or if maybe this can be a blessing to some other people. Now: I think this approach to devotions could work for any serious Christian. But I decided to begin with people who are already familiar with Big Idea preaching, so I wouldn't have to start from scratch when I'm explaining it. My hope is that, after a quick review of Big Idea preaching, you'll be able to take that same set of skills and apply it to your devotions. Ultimately, I'm hoping this can be a personal blessing to you—that it will enhance the way you interact with the Word of God, and that you'll find your daily intimacy with God growing deeper.

REVIEW OF BIG IDEA PREACHING

Let's do a turbo review of Big Idea preaching, drawing from the work of pioneers like Haddon Robinson and Don Sunujkian. How do you look at a passage of Scripture and discern the Big Idea?

Two Big Questions: Subject and Complement

You follow your basic exegesis with two questions. First, "What is the text talking about?" And second, "What is the text saying about what it's talking about?"

Let's take those one at a time. The first question is "What is the text talking about?" That question is called the *subject*, and the subject is always phrased in the form of a question.

Let's use Philippians 4:4-9 as an example:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Subject: *How did Paul find peace in difficult circumstances?*

The second question we ask is: “What does the text *say* about what it’s talking about?” In other words, how does it answer that question raised in the subject? That second question is called the *complement*. It complements the subject by answering it.

Complement: *Through a rich prayer life and a pure thought life.*

Exegetical Big Idea

Then, we simply put the subject and complement together to form the exegetical Big Idea.

Exegetical Big Idea: *Paul found peace in difficult circumstances through a rich prayer life and a pure thought life.*

This Big Idea certainly doesn’t address every single detail in the text, but it faithfully represents the main idea.

Is it ready to preach yet? No! We need to take this Exegetical Big Idea and phrase it in a way that will connect with the lives of the listeners.

Homiletical Big Idea

The Homiletical Big Idea is more applicational. It needs to reflect the content of the Exegetical Big Idea, in a way that’s more applicational to the life of the listener.

Staying with Philippians 4:4-9, the homiletical subject and complement could be the following:

Subject: *How can we find peace in difficult circumstances?*

Complement: *Through a rich prayer life and a pure thought life.*

Putting subject and complement together...

Homiletical Big Idea: *We can find peace in difficult circumstances through a rich prayer life and a pure thought life.*

Now it’s no longer just about Paul; it’s about *us*. But it’s still not ready to preach! Because if you’re a skillful Big Idea preacher, you take it one step further.

Preachable Big Idea

From that Homiletical Big Idea, you develop a pithy, memorable statement, and you repeat it frequently throughout the sermon. I'll call it the "Preachable Big Idea."

So for Philippians 4:4-9, what's our preachable Big Idea? How about this:

Preachable Big Idea: *Rich prayer and pure thoughts lead to deep peace.*

When a preacher reinforces the Big Idea at key points in the sermon, the listeners will likely remember it and benefit from its truth long after the sermon ends. So if you give a great Big Idea sermon on Philippians 4:4-9, somebody might walk out of your church, and 3 days later they say, "I can't remember the name of that book of the Bible, or who wrote it, or what was happening in the writer's life, but I remember this: *Rich prayer and pure thoughts lead to deep peace.*" A good Big Idea sticks with people long after the sermon.

Let's do a few more examples to make sure we have this down.

1. Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

Exegetical

Subject: *What effect did the cross have on Jew/Gentile relationships within the church?*

Complement: *It broke down all barriers, making everyone equal.*

Big Idea: *The cross broke down all barriers between Jew and Gentile in the church, making everyone equal.*

Homiletical

Subject: *How should we relate to others in the church who are ethnically or culturally different from us?*

Complement: *As full equals, because of the reconciling power of the cross.*

Big Idea: *We should relate to ethnically or culturally different people in church as full equals, because of the reconciling power of the cross.*

Preachable Big Idea: *We're all equal at the foot of the cross.*

2. Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-20

Exegetical

Subject: *How can believers combat the spiritual darkness around them?*

Complement: *With the spiritual weapons God provides.*

Big Idea: *Believers can combat the spiritual darkness around them with the spiritual weapons God provides.*

Homiletical

Subject: *How can we combat the spiritual darkness around us?*

Complement: *With the spiritual weapons God provides.*

Big Idea: *We can combat the spiritual darkness around us with the spiritual weapons God provides.*

Preachable Big Idea: *Fight spiritual battles with spiritual weapons.*

3. Scripture: Philippians 3:1-11

Exegetical

Subject: *Where did Paul learn to find his identity and worth?*

Complement: *In Christ, not his own merits.*

Big Idea: *Paul learned to find his identity and worth not in his own merits, but in Christ.*

Homiletical

Subject: *Where should we find our identity and worth?*

Complement: *In Christ, not our own merits.*

Big Idea: *We should find our identity and worth not in our own merits, but in Christ.*

Preachable Big Idea: *Trade your résumé for the perfect record of Jesus.*

DESCRIPTION OF BIG IDEA DEVOTIONS

How do you take the skills of Big Idea Preaching and apply them to devotions? It's actually very easy. You use the same basic approach, but it becomes a little less academic, and more personal. Here are the steps to follow:

1. **Pray.** Calm your heart and ask God to speak to you through his Word.
2. **Read.** Read a short passage slowly & thoughtfully. Read it again.
3. **Summarize.** In your journal, briefly summarize the passage. (approx. 1/3 of journal page)
4. **Meditate.** Meditate on the passage, noting thoughts in your journal. (approx. 1/3 page)
5. **Subject & Complement.** What is the main question this text is asking and answering? Phrase it in a personal, applicational way.
6. **Big Idea Prayer.** From your homiletical subject & complement, compose a simple, memorable prayer, asking God for the grace to apply the Big Idea of the passage.
7. **Let the Word Richly Dwell in You.** Pray that Big Idea prayer for yourself and others throughout the day, intentionally live it out, and look for opportunities to share it with others.

(See Appendix 1, "Sample Journal Page," for an example).

Since steps 1-4 will vary according to your personal style, and I'll comment on step 7 later, let's do a few test cases of steps 5 and 6, using the Scriptures from the previous examples.

Example A: Philippians 4:4-9. (this is the example in Appendix 1, from my personal journal)

Step 5: Subject & Complement

Subject: *What is the path to peace?*

Complement: *A rich prayer life and a pure thought life.*

Step 6: Big Idea Prayer

"Father, make me a man of rich prayer and pure thoughts."

Example B: Ephesians 2:11-22

Step 5: Subject & Complement

Subject: *How should we relate to others in the church who are ethnically or culturally different from us?*

Complement: *As full equals, because of the reconciling power of the cross.*

Step 6: Big Idea Prayer

"Father, help me to treat everyone in the church as full equals."

Example C: Ephesians 6:10-20

Step 5: Subject & Complement

Subject: *How can we combat the spiritual darkness around us?*

Complement: *With the spiritual weapons God provides.*

Step 6: Big Idea Prayer

"Father, help me to fight the spiritual darkness with spiritual weapons."

Example D: Philippians 3:1-11

Step 5: Subject & Complement

Subject: *Where should we find our identity and worth?*

Complement: *In Christ, not our own merits.*

Step 6: Big Idea Prayer

"Father, help me to find my value in the perfect résumé of Jesus."

How to "Let the Word Richly Dwell in You"

Step #7 is where this devotional method provides its most powerful benefit. Rather than forgetting what you've read shortly after your devotional time, you now have a simple, memorable prayer that reminds you of the core truth of that day's Scripture throughout the day. Here are some suggestions to get the most out of this final step:

Write it.

Write the Big Idea prayer in your journal, and write it somewhere you'll see throughout the day. I use the "Notes" app on my iPhone. (see Appendix 2, from my iPhone).

Pray it.

Set aside some time to pray the Big Idea prayer for yourself and others. I do this on a daily 2-mile walk immediately after my morning time in the Word. I strongly suggest the use of a prayer list. Besides my family members, I have six lists in the back of my journal: my staff, my elders, guys in my men's group, supported missionaries, fellow clergy, and evangelistic prospects. Each day I pray the Big Idea Prayer for myself, my family members, and one person from each of those six lists. Take a moment to think of what people you'd like to pray for on a regular basis.

Share it.

Throughout the day, look for opportunities to share the Big Idea concept from your devotions with others. I am often amazed at how often God's Word to me that day perfectly fits someone's need.

Live it.

Intentionally apply the truth you've heard from God, taking steps of obedience in the power of the Holy Spirit.

HOMEWORK/NEXT STEPS

Over the next two weeks, your assignment is to put Big Idea Devotions into practice, following steps 1-7 (above). Since no one is perfect, I'm asking for a commitment to use Big Idea devotions *at least 5 times each week, for a total of at least 10 times*. Using the journal provided, work through the book of James using the following divisions.

1. James 1:1-12
2. James 1:13-18
3. James 1:19-20
4. James 1:22-25
5. James 1:26-27
6. James 2:1-13
7. James 2:14-26
8. James 3:1-12
9. James 3:13-18
10. James 4:1-12
11. James 4:13-17
12. James 5:1-6
13. James 5:7-12
14. James 5:13-20

Throughout the two weeks, feel free to reach out to me personally if you are getting stuck, or to ask any questions. You can reach me through email at dave@thechapel.org, or by phone at 973-943-2683.

FINAL STEPS

Following these two weeks, I will assess your experience in two ways:

- A closing questionnaire.
- A closing focus group.

Thank you for your participation in this project!

DATUM/DATE Wed., 2/9/22

Philip. 4: 4-9. Our Peace, Our Prayer & Our Mind

- Rejoice in Lord always!
- Let your Kindness be evident to all
- Lord is near
- Do not worry about anything; instead -
 - on every occasion with prayer & petition
 - present your requests to God & give thanks
 - and peace of God will guard heart/mind in Christ
- Think about whatever is -
 - true - noble - right - pure
 - lovely - admirable - excellent - praiseworthy
- Put into practice all you've heard/seen in me.
- God of peace will be with you.
- 3 big choices: rejoice, pray, think
(opposite: complain, worry, dwell on worthless things)
- 3 promises: God's nearness, God's peace, God's presence

S: What is the path to peace?

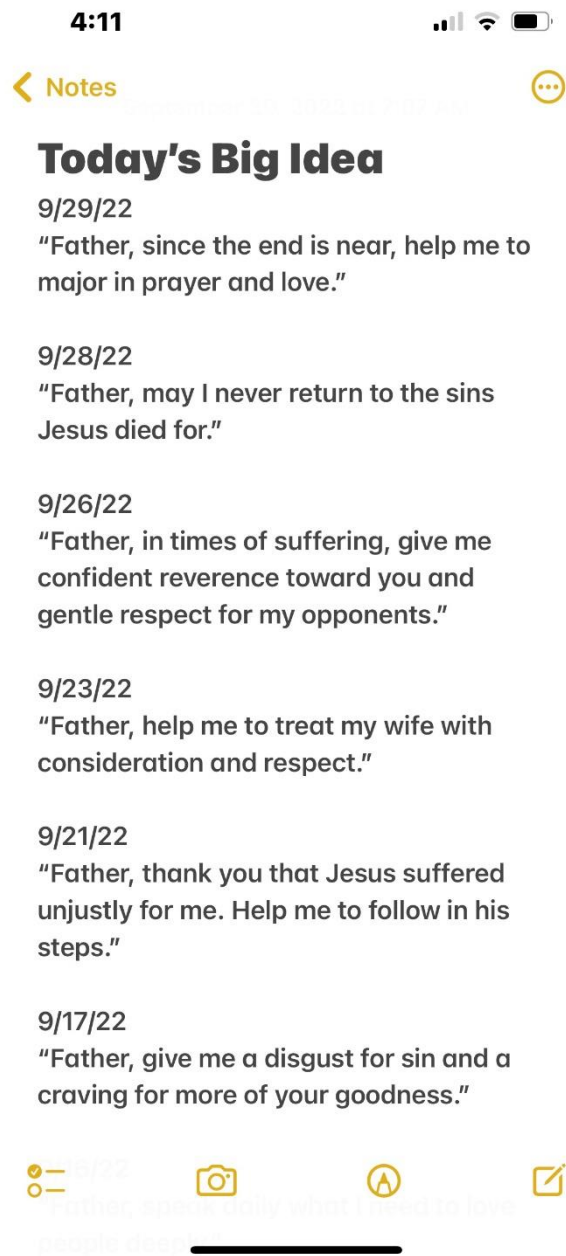
C: A rich prayer life & a pure thought life.

«Father, make me a man of rich prayer & pure thoughts».

Prayer List:

- | | |
|-----------|-------------|
| o Cory | o John Hama |
| o Ray | o Bob T. |
| o John O. | o Steve B. |

Appendix 2: Big Ideas in “Notes” App



APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Big Idea Devotions

Closing Focus Group – November 14, 2023

1. Overall, how would you describe the experience of participating in this project?
 2. Was there anything confusing or unclear about how to do Big Idea Devotions?
 3. What was the most helpful part of the project for you?
 4. What was the least helpful part of the project for you?
 5. If you haven't typically used a journal for your devotions, how did you find the experience of using a journal?
 6. If you haven't typically used a prayer list, how did you find the experience of using a prayer list?
 7. How could I improve the Big Idea Devotions concept to make it more helpful?
 8. Do you see yourself incorporating any elements of Big Idea Devotions in your devotional life going forward? If so, what elements? If not, why not?
 9. Do you feel that people who aren't already trained in Big Idea Preaching could benefit from Big Idea Devotions? Why/why not?
 10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Big Idea Devotions?
-

Thank you so much for participating in this project! It was a pleasure working with each one of you, and I would not have been able to complete the project without you. Although this formally concludes your part, I am always available if you want to share ideas and insights in the future—I would love to hear from you.

To close, I want to pray a Big Idea Prayer for you, based on 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

S: How can we be thoroughly equipped for every good work?

C: By breathing in the Scriptures that God breathed out.

"Father, help us to always delight in breathing in your Word, so we'll be equipped for your work."

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
INFORMED CONSENT
To Participate in a Research Study Focus Group

Doctor of Ministry thesis-project
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary – South Hamilton, MA
Title of Project: Big Idea Devotions for Preachers
Researcher: Reverend David Gustavsen
Phone Number: 973-334-6657
Email: dave@thechapel.org

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

David Gustavsen is conducting research on the efficacy of using a Big Idea approach to personal devotions. The purpose of your participation in this research is to help the researcher gather information for the completion of the thesis-project; which is a requirement for his completion of the Doctor of Ministry Degree at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. You were selected as a possible participant in this focus group because of your participation in the other elements of the Big Idea Devotions for Preachers study (opening questionnaire, initial training session, 2-week “lab”, and closing questionnaire).

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this focus group, you will join others on a Zoom call that will last approximately one hour. Pastor Gustavsen will ask a series of questions regarding your experience in practicing Big Idea Devotions, and you will be invited to give feedback.

C. RISKS

The questions will be personal in nature and therefore could cause personal embarrassment or discomfort in answering. Therefore, you are in no obligation to answer any questions during the focus group or on the questionnaire.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities of participants will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All data collection and retention methods will be given number codes and stored securely. No names or

any other identification markers will be placed on them. Only the researcher will have access to the files after the data is collected.

E. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

The anticipated benefit of your participation in this focus group is to gain personal, practical insights regarding how Big Idea Devotions could enhance your personal devotional life

F. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your decision whether or not to participate in this focus group is voluntary and will not affect your relationship to the researcher or your ability to otherwise participate in other elements of this thesis-project. If choose to participate in this group, you can withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time without prejudice.

G. QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Dave Gustavsen by calling 973-334-6657. You can also contact Dr. David Currie, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary at 978-646-4176 or dcurrie@gordonconwell.edu with any questions about the rights of research participants or research-related concerns.

CONSENT

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE AGREED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY AFTER READING ALL OF THE INFORMATION ABOVE AND YOU UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION IN THIS FORM, HAVE HAD ANY QUESTIONS ANSWERED AND HAVE RECEIVED A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOU TO KEEP.

Signature _____ Date _____

Research Participant

Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher

APPENDIX D

UNABRIDGED RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED QUESTION ON CLOSING QUESTIONNAIRE

PARTICIPANT 1: I appreciated the guided track through James. I'm interested to see how I could utilize Big Idea Devotions on a self-guided / self-paced study of another book of the Bible. Looking forward to it!

PARTICIPANT 2: I think you are onto something Dave. Though I only did it four times. I plan to begin to do it as my main devotions. Hopefully with more consistency. I like it because it gives you one solid thought to work on and pray for the day. Just want to find a way for me to keep recalling that big idea through the day. Felt like I would have it in the morning but would forget about it later in the day. Thanks for inviting me to this.

PARTICIPANT 3: My only concern is that it becomes too mechanical, otherwise a great concept.

PARTICIPANT 4: Wow, great discipline for focused study, meditation and application. Thank you...

PARTICIPANT 5: I was accustomed to using a journal during my daily devotional time but this new approach was more systemic and thorough. I intend to continue using this new approach.

PARTICIPANT 6: I think big idea with subject and complement comes easier to some. I am not a wordsmith so this was harder for me but I embrace the concept as a good one. I think it will be powerful for more creative people

PARTICIPANT 7: I was not used to doing Big Idea thinking in my personal devotions because it is how I would do my professional preparation. I sometimes struggled to focus on this being personal time to listen to God. To be fair I am not sure why that was and I think that sorting through this has been good for both my professional and personal lives. In other words there shouldn't be that deep a divide between the two worlds.

PARTICIPANT 8: Great experience that sharpened the journaling that I do daily.

PARTICIPANT 9: It was an overall great experience. James was a good choice to start with. I would advise starting with an epistle because it helps develop the ability to identify the subject and complement.

PARTICIPANT 10: This is a very good model for personal devotions. Also very helpful to preachers as it trains you to start looking for the big idea with every passage. I'm looking forward to continuing this in my devotionals!

PARTICIPANT 11: I loved this idea--so often I have read Scripture in the morning as a devotion and later on--sometimes even an hour later, I can hardly remember what I read. This was so good to focus and wrestle a little with the text to come up with the subject and complement and then intentionally try to apply them to my life. My intention is to continue to practice this style of devotions. The only tweak for me will be that I am going to try to do the initial work and prayer on one day and then the next day come back and reread the same passage and continue to pray and focus on it. For me, I think that will help to further build the ideas and concepts in that Scripture into my life, instead of moving on right away to the next passage. I found 5 different ideas a week to be a lot now that I look back and try to recall them--I still can recall most, but if I continue on, it will get more difficult. Also, the only other area that I struggled with was making my prayer short and pithy. I kept wanting to include too much info in my prayer, but I think it got better as I went along. Lastly, can you please share your prayer for each of the passages in James with us--that might help me to work on the short and memorable prayers as I compare yours to mine. Thanks so much Dave for including me in this study! It meant a lot to be a part of it! Dave Barone

PARTICIPANT 13: Good resource, I enjoyed the daily Big Idea thoughts and sharing them on Facebook

PARTICIPANT 14: Thank you so much for creating this connection between big idea preaching and personal devotions. I've been utilizing the big idea in my preaching for as long as I've been preaching, but I always thought of it as a useful tool for other people's spiritual growth, never my own. I never connected the dots that this tool that was useful for everyone else could also be useful for me in my own personal devotions. Your method is so clear, memorable, and easy to incorporate into my personal devotions that it something I definitely carry with me into the future. Thank you again!

PARTICIPANT 15: I think my familiarity with the book of James helped me in understanding each passage and coming up with the Big Idea. If I take this approach with another book of the Bible that I'm less familiar with, I wonder how hard it might be to come up with a "good" Big Idea to work with...

PARTICIPANT 16: Honestly, this may be one of the best devotional techniques I've ever done.

PARTICIPANT 18: I really liked this practice! With a toddler at home and a busy work schedule, finding the time to accomplish the study was the most difficult part. I imagine if/when my schedule becomes more regular, I would use this method for daily devotions and would find more ways to incorporate it into my work as well. I think pushing the Big Idea past Homiletical and into a short, crystalized prayer was the most innovative part and something I will take with me even as I prepare sermons.

PARTICIPANT 19: Two things: First, questions that I answered lower (rarely, sometimes/somewhat, etc.) has nothing to do with the effectiveness of Big Idea Devotions and is more of a reflection of a funk I've been in related to God's presence and personal devotions. Second, I found it helpful to review/pray over the previous few days as part of my devotion for the day.

PARTICIPANT 20: It was an excellent median for a pastor between just reading the Bible devotionally and exegeting a passage.

PARTICIPANT 21: I really enjoyed this approach to daily devotions. It helped me center my thoughts on the passages, and dive into the truth principle. It brought an intentionality to my devotions that was much needed.

PARTICIPANT 22: I appreciated this approach quite a bit! It helped engage my "preacher brain" in a way that was productive for the development of my private walk with Jesus. I enjoyed the process of identifying the "Big Idea" and found it much easier to be in prayer for myself and others throughout the day - and it's amazing how relevant each prayer was to my circumstances almost every day I participated. I've also suggested this to a friend of mine, with whom I'm regularly gathering to do Bible study.

PARTICIPANT 23: I enjoyed this practice. It was very different from my normal devotional practice. I really enjoyed utilizing Dave's example of the prayer lists. That helped me pray more purposefully for others.

PARTICIPANT 24: This has been a great addition to my daily spiritual development.

APPENDIX E

UNABRIDGED TRANSCRIPT OF FOCUS GROUP

Focus Group Transcript

Monday, November 14, 2022

Participants: Dave Gustavsen (moderator)+ 6 study participants

1. Overall, how would you describe the experience of participating in this project?

FG Participant A: I would say it was phenomenal. I really appreciated it. Yeah—it was really good. Being in seminary now, I struggle to do devotions well, because I keep on overdoing them, and then it becomes more like a project than personal devotion. So this was really good to kind of just re-focus a bit. I was initially going to do it with a commentary, and then I decided not to, because I spend so much time in commentary for other things, so I decided to just use the Word and the notebook. Just being able to intensively focus in one area was really beneficial—some of the best devotions I’ve had in long time.

FG Participant B: I really enjoyed it. I found it...it was eye-opening to me—I think I realized probably a lack of focus in my own devotions. Because I’m in the Bible just personally on a very regular basis. I tend to take on larger portions to get through the Bible in a year, or maybe a year and a half. But this discipline—I thought, “Wow—I feel like I’m coming away with a much clearer picture of a text. And the whole Big Idea of prayer—um—obviously your desire for that is that it sticks to you like Velcro—not only for the day but it might last a little longer. And I found it staying with me—so it was an idea independent of all my pastoral tasks...it was something independent between God and me in those moments. I didn’t find myself in those moments where I was really praying it through with others, but I could see how that would be a natural step. The main idea for me was that there was something sticking to me that typically wasn’t. So I found a lot of value in it.

FG Participant C: I’ll actually echo that. Because typically I use the Bible in a year, from Nicky Gumbel—I just love his writing—it forces me to get into 2 Chronicles, or something I wouldn’t spend a lot of time in. But I appreciate what David said: you do that, and you’re reading broadly, which is wonderful, but there’s days where you’re not taking anything away. So this process really forces you to focus. And I like boiling it down to the big idea—that nugget that you can think about the next day or the week after.

FG Participant D: It was a good combination of simple in, like, devotional study, but also in-depth enough that you’re going through to come away with what the Big Idea was. Really knowing the passage, without having to go too deep—but still not get shallow. It was helpful. I’ve always wanted to journal more and be more disciplined. Last year I journaled through the Psalms in my own words—it reminded me of doing that.

FG Participant E: For myself, journaling was not the new part of it—I've been doing that for the last two or so years. What was new was the big idea portion of it—focusing and coming back and asking the questions about what the subject was—things to chew on. I enjoyed it—it was a more focused Bible study, so that's the benefit for me.

2. Was there anything confusing or unclear about how to do Big Idea Devotions? Did you find yourself getting stuck or confused, or were you able to hit the ground running?

FG Participant B: I thought (instructions) were clear. I had to keep going back to your examples to make sure I was kind of tight with subject/complement—you know, I studied at GCTS, where that's part of their creed, almost. I still needed to go back to your examples—I found those really helpful just to tighten up the way that I'd ask and answer the question, and what should the big idea prayer look like. I thought your instruction was really clear, but having those examples within reach was particularly helpful.

FG Participant C: Yeah, I kept that document open every time, just as a checklist to follow.

FG Participant B: I keep Haddon Robinson's Biblical Preaching within reach—I need that example in front of me.

FG Participant E: I thought the instructions were clear; my application, maybe not so. The area I kind of messed up on was the meditation part; I checked all the boxes, but at the beginning, failed to meditate on it. So I did a correction about halfway through it.

FG Participant A: In the beginning—the instructions were super clear, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to remember them. So I actually made a little chart thing of like how it's supposed to look. After day four I didn't even have to look, but for the first few days it helped.

FG Participant F: Your examples were good, and I kept going back to your examples. I was trying to distinguish between exegetical big idea and your homiletical big idea, and what's my devotional big idea. So your examples helped me with that.

3. What was the most helpful part of the project for you?

FG Participant B: For me it was the repetition---pray, read the text, read it again, outline/summarize it, and reflect on it. Those are things that I'm just not doing in my own devotions, and I was really delighted with the clarity, even of some of the nuances of the text, that I was probably glossing over—I had some deep ruts in my devotional life, because you just do it day after day after day...for me this was like getting a wheel out of that rut. What happens when you read the text, read it again, write a little outline—and even better, I'm taking some time to reflect on it...and to write it down as a runway to subject, complement and all of that...there was just a degree of clarity that I'm not getting in my own devotional life. And I think the way you laid it out—read it, read it

again—and I think the way you laid it out, with bite-size pieces, so I’m not saying, “I need an hour and a half to do this...”, I felt like with that 20-40 minute range that I was giving myself, something was happening—something meaningful. So...that combination was particularly helpful.

FG Participant D: I think what helped is that it fell somewhere between full exegetical study, where you’re really digging in, and being—sometimes we do more of a devotional reading—you’re not really grasping what the text saying. So this is somewhere in between that. It kept you focused on the text, and as you were writing those things, it really made you say, “Okay—what does the passage say.” Whereas, a lot of times, if I read devotionally and pray, I’m kind of skipping that. This forced me to stay in the text, but on a more devotional level.

FG Participant C: I like the idea of thinking of specific people to pray in a specific way for.

FG Participant A: I would say for me, the two parts I really liked were the meditate part. I think too often I can summarize well. But then, if I didn’t spend enough time in the meditate, it makes the subject/complement part really difficult, because I haven’t really ingested it. So that really stopped you and made you focus on that part. The second part was taking it out of the journal and putting it into your phone—b/c I used the notes app, and then I shared the Big Idea prayer with Ashley—so she could see what I was praying and we could both have that prayer for the day. That was a neat component, to incorporate our relationship into this.

4. Was there any part that you didn’t find helpful?

Silence.

5. If you haven’t typically used a journal for your devotions, how did you find the experience of using a journal?

FG Participant B: Historically, my mother has given me journals...but in the past I never really used it. I broke all kinds of records this last week, and I see the value in it. Forces you to slow down and formulate the thought. You can’t formulate a thought and be lazy at the same time.

6. If you haven’t typically used a prayer list, how did you find the experience of using a prayer list?

FG Participant C: I do have prayer lists, but I like the idea of praying Scripture over them and for them. That was different for me.

FG Participant A: I didn’t use a prayer list other than Ashley and me. But what I did do is, during the prayer time, prayed over my day and who I’d be interacting with. I was actually shocked how many times I said, “I really need to re-pray this prayer!”

7. How could I improve the Big Idea Devotions concept to make it more helpful?

FG Participant B: I was a little curious—you know, I think you gave us really nice-size pericopes to work with. In a busy life, you're still carving out some real time—you said 20 minutes minimum, so I always had that in the back of my mind. I wonder, with practice, can bigger texts...b/c I see tremendous value on just focusing on a pericope—that's what I preach. But I'd be curious to address—some of you out there are reading a chapter a day, or 3-4 chapters a day. How would this fit into...what would the strategy be. Or maybe that's a whole other discipline.

FG Participant D: Have you done this with different genres of Scripture? Especially with narrative. I wonder what this could look like on your example page if you gave examples from different genres of Scripture.

FG Participant A: I was curious: who is your ideal customer base? Specifically for people already in ministry, who are around Big Idea thought? I don't regularly practice it, so it took me a while to develop the skills.

8. Do you see yourself incorporating any elements of Big Idea Devotions in your devotional life going forward? If so, what elements? If not, why not?

FG Participant A: I'm just going to steal this and keep doing it. In terms of simplicity and that balance, I found this so enriching that I'm just going to keep chugging along with it.

FG Participant B: I'm one of those who reads the Bible every year; this is causing me to consider adopting this new method. Or even with reading 2-3 chapters a day, I'll be slowing down, summarizing, narrowing down the ideas. Even my preaching in the last week or so—it just feels tighter—the whole prep time. So thank you for that—it's super cool. And I think it will continue to be that way.

FG Participant C: I would hope the Big Idea prayer sticks. So regardless of what I'm doing, I like that: converting the core idea into a prayer.

FG Participant E: I intend to continue using it. I think it's a good discipline. I was wondering—what happens when I jump over the OT. So I tried it in Daniel, and it works just fine.

9. Do you feel that people who aren't already trained in Big Idea Preaching could benefit from Big Idea Devotions? Why/why not?

FG Participant F: There might be some merit, but I see this greatly benefitting those who preach on a regular basis. "Normal people" will have a hard time coming up with the big idea from a passage, especially if the passage has multiple possible big ideas.

FG Participant B: Well-disciplined friend—said "I've never really been taught how to read the Bible." I thought, "Man, I could see this being a really good tool to help people, in concert with talking about why historical context matters, literary genres, etc." There's a discipline that

people just aren't being taught. Folks in my congregation—I'd love to walk them through some of these steps.

FG Participant C: I think it could be valuable for any individual—not just preachers and teachers. I think you could teach the basics, and leave out details.

FG Participant E: Coming from a non-pastoral role, I think it is teachable. It may not be as natural as someone trained in that area, but teachable.

FG Participant A: I would really encourage it to be taught to the "normal" people. It's like any skill—you don't jump right into the most advanced part; you help people begin working these muscles. I think there's something here that can be so beneficial to so many people.

FG Participant D: Training, equipping, coaching would be so important.

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Big Idea Devotions?

FG Participant B: I hope you run with it. I think it can be an incredible tool for the kingdom. I haven't come across a tool like this for the broader church. We can't overemphasize the need to disciple people.

FG Participant A: I'd love to see a manual to unpack this, for those who don't have any practice in Big Idea thought. I think it's a really neat tool that can do a lot for the church.

Additional conversation:

Is it okay if two different people come up with two completely different Big Ideas from the same passage? (We discussed it, and all agreed that there are some big ideas which are more true to a text than others. BUT, we need to leave room for the Spirit to highlight a certain portion of a text that we need to focus on for that day. So you might come up with a prayer that doesn't capture the true big idea for a text, but it is a truth in that text, and it's what you need to hear that day. Remember, this is not a sermon; it's devotions.). It was suggested that this could be explained in the teaching.

Someone suggested walking with a group of people through a book of the Bible, and each week you compare your big idea prayers. Adds communal element to this.

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